



# A Fine Joke

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*To dear Sheryl for whom this book was written*

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# A Great Misfortune

His head was pounding when he woke, a tight band of agony that squeezed and pressed against his skull. He opened his eyes slowly, wincing against the searing daylight; even more slowly he pushed himself to a seated position.

His vision swam for a moment, everything hazy and unclear but then he saw the Prussian blue striped wall coverings and the enormous leather chair with a book still laying on its seat and he knew he was at his home in London. But how had he gotten here? His mind struggled to make sense of it all, to remember what had happened and when.

Rosings, he had been at Rosings and Elizabeth Bennet was there and then—oh!

Remembrance was sudden and painful. Hunsford cottage, his declarations of love and her declarations of hatred, both equal in

measure it would seem. He winced, the motion causing a shooting pain into his head.

“Brother?” Georgiana’s face, pale and worried, floated into his line of vision. “You are awake! How do you feel?”

“I feel...” He trailed off. In truth, he was not certain how exactly he was feeling. Miserable, but was it his head or his heart? “I scarcely know. A bit beat up, I suppose. What happened?”

“He has lost his memory!” Georgiana exclaimed to someone, unseen, also in the room.

“Not wholly unexpected.” A young man, downy-cheeked and fair, leant into view. “Not likely to be permanent either. Mr Darcy, sir, do you know where you are?”

Darcy recoiled. “Who might you be? And why are you in my bedchamber? Which I do know is in London, by the by.”

“Forgive me, sir.” The man stepped back at once. “I am Mr Simmons, your physician.”

“Mr Dunwoody is my personal physician.” Darcy did his best to be authoritative, though it was a struggle, being that he was in his nightshirt and feeling more than a little befuddled.

“I am here at Dunwoody’s request,” said Simmons, with a kindly smile as he passed Darcy a letter of introduction from his usual physician. “Dunwoody thought it best that I should examine you as I have had particular experience in illnesses such as these.”

Darcy scanned the letter quickly, noting it was his physician’s seal on the note and appeared to be his writing. “Very well. But what happened to me? Why am I in this bed unable to recall anything of how I got here?”

Studying Darcy for a moment, Simmons dismissed Georgiana from the room.

Simmons began his examination as soon as the door closed behind her. He pressed his ear to Darcy’s chest, he poked his face in several places, lifted his eyelids and, most unusually, used a crude sort of musical instrument to produce tones near his ears, ordering Darcy to tell him if he could hear them.

When he had done, he leant back, looking rather grave.

He then began to question Darcy on the events of the previous weeks: his time at Rosings Park, his activities there, the persons he had seen and spoken to. Darcy did what he could to conceal the miserable truth of the matter, but he could not deny that he felt very much like Simmons somehow knew of his failed proposal.

When the recitation was done, Simmons rose, going to the window and folding his hands behind his back. Darcy watched him for a time, his anxiety increasing, until at last he could tolerate no more. "Well? What is it?"

Simmons returned to the seat by Darcy's bed. "I cannot lie to you, sir, this is very much what I had hoped I would not find."

Darcy said nothing, uneasiness and fear twisting in his gut.

"Allow me to relate to you what I know." Simmons took a seat, folding his hands on the small paunch of his stomach and staring at a point far distant. After a moment, he began to speak. "You likely recall very little of the tenth of April—or do you?"

The tenth of April? He knew nothing of it though being that it was the day following the ninth of April—and the ninth of April would be forever remembered as the day of the most painful humiliation of his life. He shook his head in response.

"On the tenth of April, you were found at Bromley, in a tavern, rather, um..." Simmons lightly cleared his throat. "You were drunk."

"Drunk in a tavern at Bromley!" Darcy could not fathom that even Elizabeth Bennet's rejection could lead him to such behaviour as this. "Impossible. Where was my cousin?"

"Your cousin?"

"Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam." Darcy spoke sternly. "He travelled with me."

"Ah, the colonel, yes. The colonel was the gentleman who was summoned to Bromley to collect you on the eleventh of April. Needless to say, between the tenth and the eleventh—when it was observed you and your horse were missing without word to anyone—everyone at Rosings was quite concerned for what dreadful fate might have befallen you."

Darcy sighed. Such disgraceful actions! Once Fitzwilliam knew he was well, he would likely run him through for such appalling rudeness. "So who found me in Bromley?"

"You were very fortunate to be found on Friday and given a room at a nearby inn."

"But who? Who found me in such a state?" Darcy supposed that whoever had done so had done him a good turn.

"The tavern, where you were found, was rather," again Simmons cleared his throat. "Rough. Not your usual sort of place at all. They might not have looked for you in such an establishment for some



time if ever. Fortunately, the son of one of the former stewards at your house in Derbyshire recognised and cared for you.”

Sudden suspicion and anger shot through Darcy. “Not George Wickham, surely?”

“Why, yes.”

“Well, this is absurd!” Darcy shot up, swinging his legs over the side of his bed. “I believe we have our explanation now! Wickham has put some sort of a... an agent to induce madness... he is behind this, I assure you, now permit me to—”

What it was that Darcy intended to do would be lost, for as he attempted to rise, he learnt that his limbs lacked the strength to support him. Within moments he found himself in an undignified heap beside his bed, his head throbbing more than ever.

Simmons looked down on him pityingly for a moment before getting to his own feet and hoisting Darcy back into his bed. “I entreat you not to attempt further sudden movement, sir,” said the man calmly.

“What sort of illness induces such as this?”

“A very serious one, I am afraid.”

Simmons was stern and grave and kind all at once and it chastened Darcy. He nodded and settled himself back into the bed linens.

“Mr Wickham was concerned by the state in which he found you—to say nothing of the fact that it is dangerous for a man of your standing to be in such a place—so he removed you and arranged for lodgings in Bromley.”

“Sounds unlikely,” Darcy said. “Did he lighten my purse while he did it?”

“You were there without your purse,” said Simmons with an admonishing little frown. “Mr Wickham arranged everything—was very good to you, in fact. It was he who sent word to your cousin to come retrieve you. Alas, that was not the whole of the problem.”

“No?”

Simmons shook his head sadly. “No, for as it turns out, when your cousin asked for the bill from the tavern keeper, he realised you had, in fact, had rather little to drink—one tankard. We could not account for your drunken state. Thus it was discovered that you suffer from a lack of symmetry.”

“Lack of symmetry?” Darcy fought the urge to laugh. Surely lack of symmetry was nothing so concerning?

“You have contracted an illness of a peculiar nature,” explained Simmons. “One of the hallmarks of it is rapid and irreversible loss of symmetry in one’s face and drunken behaviour in the absence of strong drink.”

Darcy’s jaw dropped. He watched as Simmons rose and took a looking glass from his dressing room, bringing it to him to show him. Darcy studied himself critically. “I do not see it.”

“Those who suffer this are rarely able to discern it in themselves. Not only does one become asymmetrical in appearance but also in the ability to see the affliction. So the two asymmetries cancel one another, and the bearer thus appears correct to himself, but not to others.” Simmons smiled sadly. “I am alas something of an expert in this field, Mr Darcy. Most sufferers see it—or rather fail to see it—just as you do.”

“Oh,” said Darcy, still studying himself. In truth, now that he looked a bit more closely, he did indeed see that his left nostril was not precisely aligned with the right... and did his left dimple not seem higher than the right? Why were his eyelashes so long on his right eye... or was it that they were shortened on the left?

“Will the condition eventually set itself aright?”

Simmons pressed his lips together, looking down for a moment. He reached, taking the glass from Darcy’s hand, and setting it gently beside them on the night table. “I am afraid not,” he said quietly. “The asymmetry, you see, is but a symptom of a much larger problem. A problem in your brain.”

“My brain!”

“I am afraid so,” Simmons confirmed. “There is not an easy way to tell you this, Mr Darcy, but I fear that you do not have very long to live.”

Darcy’s mouth fell agape again and he stared, disbelieving, at Simmons. He was dying? But... but how? It could not be. “Preposterous.”

Simmons said nothing.

“But I am exceedingly healthy!”

Simmons offered a rueful smile and half a nod.

Darcy leant back, thinking of it. Georgiana left alone, Pemberley without an heir... and what of his own dreams? Never to know true love, never to hold a child in his arms... never to understand what it was to grow old with someone. An ache began in his chest, and he swallowed against the pain of knowing all he would never get to

experience.

“Will it be long in coming?” He asked, hearing that his voice had thickened. “Can such a thing be predicted?”

Simmons shrugged. “You can enjoy relative good health for several months more—with good fortune, perhaps you might even survive into early autumn.”

“A few months.” It was more than Darcy had expected but still astonishing nonetheless.

“I will give you some remedies to help you.” Simmons regarded him a moment before adding, “I cannot tell you how sorry I am to be the bearer of such dreadful news.”

“But...is it certain?” Darcy asked, hearing the note of desperation in his voice.

“I am afraid so. Now, let us summon your man. I have arranged for the appropriate remedies and wish to instruct him as to their proper use.”

Fields came quickly and listened as Simmons described the regimens that he would be required to follow precisely. “Understand,” Simmons told him. “Any deviation will result in a diminished state of health for Mr Darcy, so times, amounts—all must be delivered just as I have specified here.”

Fields nodded solemnly and then stood by while the first doses were administered to Darcy. A number of instructions were ordered that Darcy listened to with half an ear: headaches would be, at times, rather unbearable. His vision might be a bit blurred, and his legs could grow weak but, on the whole, he was to enjoy relative vigour until the end. The end, when it came, would be precipitously severe and his demise rapid.

“Well then.” Simmons stood, gathering his things and preparing to depart. “Mr Darcy, I will tell you again how dreadfully sorry I am to deliver such news to you. I pray, sir, that you will be able to have as much good health as is possible in these, your last days. Do not tarry in settling your accounts, for nothing is guaranteed.”

“I understand,” Darcy replied.

The shock of it all was beginning to leave him and in its place, sorrow. Sorrow and fear and—strangely—the sense that he was meeting a predestined end. After all, his father and mother had both died young. His grandfather was killed in a hunting accident when he was forty. His great-grandfather was similarly unfortunate although the details were not clear.

Darcys are a hapless lot, he thought grimly. What made you think you could be different?

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A fine thing, thought Darcy wryly several hours later. A fine thing indeed.

Fields had helped him down to his study, Darcy leaning upon him like a man of eighty, where he intended to begin the business of settling his affairs. A complex mixture of emotions assailed him. Sadness, of course, along with a healthy measure of anger and more than a little bit of ‘why me?’ But he did not like feeling this way. You must accept it, he counselled himself. It cannot be changed. He was determined to meet death just as he had every other thing in his life—with duty, and honour above all.

He had sent a quick note to his physician who replied within an hour, saying he wished he had better news but that Simmons was the expert. Nonetheless, there was something in him which held onto hope that Simmons was wrong. Never mind his expertise, these things could never truly be known with certainty, could they? Was all hope lost?

Regardless of what other sensibilities he might own, he was resolved to behave as one who had accepted his fate. Men his age went to war, bravely throwing themselves in the face of Napoleon and whatever else threatened their beloved country without murmur—could he not likewise face death with aplomb? No pity, no wallowing about in despair for him, and to that end, he forcibly moved his thoughts from the sorrow of the situation onto the more practical aspects.

Settle his accounts, Simmons had advised him. There was nothing much to do there. Darcy was always fastidious, mindful that the world was an uncertain place and anything could happen to anyone at any time. He had learnt that lesson at his father’s knee and been exceedingly grateful for it when his father had met his own untimely demise.

So he would meet with his solicitor as well as his secretary and do what needed doing but in truth, it would require fairly minimal effort to arrange his matters of business.

For personal matters, things were a bit different. He liked to believe that he had been a fair and just master and that he had behaved with honour in all his doings, with two glaring exceptions. Elizabeth Bennet and Bingley. He must set things to right with both of them.

His past doings would be settled but the future remained unknown. *An heir*, he thought. *Is it possible, in this, the eleventh hour, to sire a child?*

It was entirely possible that, even if he was married today, conception might not occur, or if it did, the babe might not quicken until he was gone. It was possible that the child would be female, or that it would not survive childhood. The probability of begetting a male child who would take over Pemberley once he had reached his age of majority was very low.

Low, he thought, but not non-existent.

He considered the ladies of his acquaintance, names and faces drifting through his mind. He had not the least doubt that he could secure the hand of at least one of them, no doubt accompanied by a great deal of eagerness. For a relatively short time as his wife, she would earn a fortune, an exalted place in society, and she would be afforded the freedom of a widow after his demise. Many ladies would leap at the opportunity.

But supposing a child was born, would he wish to entrust such a lady with his child? With his tenants and his ancestral home? With Georgiana?

He sighed. There was but one lady who he would trust unreservedly with all he had and all that he was; that lady was Elizabeth Bennet, who alas loathed him.

*There is always Anne*, he thought dispiritedly. *Anne would do as I asked, except that she would likely die in childbirth and then my child would be an orphan, left to the care of Lady Catherine.*

For not the first time, he wondered if Anne was as sickly as she appeared. Anne had had a rather pronounced tendency toward manipulation when she was young, and he supposed she was only grown more adept in the art by now. Perhaps she was more capable of being mistress of Pemberley...

But no. He stopped his thoughts at once, envisioning his poor

little boy or girl raised under the roof of Lady Catherine and Anne. It would not do.

*Elizabeth*, he thought. *It can only be Elizabeth. But how?*

Her heart was compassionate, this he knew, but just how far would her compassion extend? What he wished was not insignificant but then again, he was offering her a world of opportunity and independence that he believed would suit her very well. She despised him... but maybe his letter had made her despise him a bit less. Maybe his apology might even help her like him a little.

An unanticipated chuckle escaped him. There was nothing to be lost in pursuing her, was there? His time was running out; risks must be taken. His headache was worsening he noted, and he summoned his man.

"Time for another dose," Fields replied.

He rose, feeling the stiffening of his joints and the nausea in his gut. They made their way back to the his bedchamber wherein Darcy was given more of the medicines he evidently required.

Before he could swallow the dreadful concoctions, doubt seized him for a moment. The medicine in hand, he asked his loyal valet, "Fields—do you see it? Do you see the asymmetry?"

Fields considered him carefully, taking his chin and turning his head to the left and the right several times before reluctantly nodding. "I do, sir, and wish heartily I did not."

Sleep would claim Darcy quickly but in the time he laid awake, he considered what alternatives lay before him; they were admittedly few. However, before it came time for dinner, he had formed a plan, one which he hoped would serve Pemberley well and permit him the greatest possible degree of enjoyment of his last days.

# Friends & Relations

“Sir, you are very pale,” fretted Fields the morning following his sad news. He had not been in support of an early morning visit to the Matlock branch of Darcy’s family, but Darcy wished to make his unhappy news known as soon as was possible.

“I am well enough,” Darcy said sharply, his tone employed to remind Fields just who was the master and who the servant. A moment later, he was repentant; it would not do to begin, already, behaving peevishly. In any case, Fields no doubt saw in his master’s eyes how his head ached, and his gut rolled with nausea. Pallor was the least of his maladies but nonetheless, it was not Field’s fault.

“Forgive me. The hours ahead of me shall be rather tiresome and unpleasant.”

Fields nodded, just as the door opened to admit them into Darcy’s uncle’s home. Darcy was soon seated in the drawing room,

coffee cup in hand and cousin in front of him. "What is it Darcy? Something pertaining to this matter in Bromley?"

"You could say that," Darcy replied, already feeling tired. "I had better wait until your father joins us before saying more."

"Because it was not so very dreadful. Certainly not your finest hour!—but who among us has not looked for solace at the bottom of a bottle now and again?" Fitzwilliam chuckled.

Darcy looked at him sharply. What did he know about all which had transpired at Hunsford? What had Darcy admitted to in these addled days since his grand humiliation?

"Look for solace?" He asked mildly. "And what misery do you ascribe me, that I should require solace?"

Levity fled Fitzwilliam's countenance in a trice. He did not move, remaining in an indifferent posture, ankle laid over one leg, and slumped in the chair, but his head went a bit straighter, and his eyes appeared to narrow. Very casually, he said, "Is that not the reason most men drink to excess?"

"You had just been with me the better part of three weeks. Was there something inherent to those weeks that led you to believe I sought solace?"

Fitzwilliam chuckled again. To Darcy's mind, the sound was tinged with anxiety. "Lady Catherine has driven many a more upright man to drink."

Darcy nodded in agreement. "And yet, we were at the end of our stay so I might have had more cause for celebration."

"Did you?"

"Do you think I did?"

"Darcy." Fitzwilliam raised both hands. "This is a silly conversation. I presumed to think you were drowning your sorrows. Forgive me. I am certain you took to drink for nothing more than the excellent taste of the pungent and watery ale as found in that establishment."

"In any case, was it not you who said I had not had much to drink?"

"What?" Fitzwilliam looked at him quizzically. "Old boy, you were as foxed as I ever saw you and no wonder! The bill that tavern keeper gave me will keep him happy for a month!"

He rose quickly. "Excuse me. I will see what is keeping my father."

Darcy said nothing as he left the room. Was it his illness that



made it such that nothing made sense anymore? Simmons said Fitzwilliam said he was not drunk—and now Fitzwilliam said he was, excessively so. Why were there so many holes in the story he was presented?

Then again, it hardly mattered. The tests had been done, and Darcy's illness confirmed. April tenth was nothing more than the means by which it had been discovered.

Fitzwilliam was gone only moments, re-entering with his father by his side. Lord Matlock was a large gentleman, not as tall as Darcy himself but much more stout.

"I am due for a meeting," he announced without preamble. "Richard said you needed to speak to me."

"I need to speak with you both. I shall not require much of your time."

Lord Matlock sat and Darcy began, surprised by how calm he felt. "I have learnt from an esteemed colleague of my personal physician that I have a serious, a fatal illness."

"An illness?" Fitzwilliam asked. "What sort of illness?"

"In my brain."

Lord Matlock rose up in his chair. "Absurd! Who is this charlatan?"

"Simmons."

"I will have the man looked into straightaway. Surely—"

"Dunwoody sent a letter introducing him. Evidently he is something of an expert in diseases of this sort."

"Do you have it?" On Darcy's nod, Lord Matlock demanded, "Let me see it."

Darcy handed it to him, and both men peered over it suspiciously. Darcy sat watching as they both read through once and then a second time carefully. Evidently it met with their grudging approval for eventually, Fitzwilliam sat back, and Lord Matlock placed the letter on the table before him, both nodding slowly with a concerned light in their eyes.

Seeing it, Darcy hastened to explain to them all that he knew. They had many questions for him about his diagnosis, and he answered as best he could while striving to remain dispassionate.

At last there was no more to be said. Fitzwilliam leaned toward him, placing his hand on his shoulder. "I am sorry Darcy. I cannot... I have not words for how grieved this makes me."

Lord Matlock had dropped his gruff demeanour and taken on the

aspect of a concerned father. "We must consult other experts. What of someone outside of England? You could go to Belgium. I have heard they can do wondrous things—"

"No." Darcy held up his hand. "I do not wish to spend my final days chasing about for some magical snake oil to heal me. I wish to do all I can to secure the future of Pemberley and to enjoy myself to the greatest extent possible. That is my wish, and I pray you would support me in that."

Both men nodded slowly.

"I should not mention this at such a time," said Lord Matlock. "However it does beg the question—what of an heir for Pemberley?"

"It does not sound as if there is time enough," opined Fitzwilliam.

"How much time do you think it takes, son?" Lord Matlock asked, a grin coming unexpectedly to his face. "Fifteen minutes, perhaps twenty when you are my age." He burst into laughter, as always enjoying a bit of ribald humour.

Fitzwilliam and Darcy both allowed him a rueful smile. Darcy said, "It is something I had considered. There is much to speak against it, of course. A child might not be conceived, it might not live; it might be a daughter, not a son. However, I must agree that to try and do as I can is no hardship."

"Well, there must be some hardship. Otherwise, things never get going." Lord Matlock laughed loudly once again. Once his mirth had subsided, he continued speaking. "In any case, it is the right thing to do and I applaud you for thinking of it."

Darcy nodded.

"So you are for Kent then?" Fitzwilliam asked.

Darcy raised his eyebrows. "Kent?"

"He need not go to Kent," said Lord Matlock. "Anne will be more than happy to marry from London, and of course she will wish to purchase some new clothing—"

Darcy interrupted them. "I have not the least intention of offering for Anne."

His uncle and cousin stopped speaking and stared at him, wholly taken aback. "But of course you must," said Fitzwilliam. "It only makes sense."

"Who else would do this for you?" Lord Matlock said. "Anne is the one. You will marry immediately and set about creating the heir

you require.”

Darcy shook his head. “I cannot deny that I did consider it but do recall, I need not only an heir but someone who can oversee Pemberley until he comes of age. Someone who will care for Georgiana. Someone who—”

“I can do all of that, with my father’s assistance,” Fitzwilliam interrupted eagerly.

Darcy frowned at him. “Someone who will make me happy in my remaining days. Being wed to Anne would not make me happy. I wish to fulfil my duty, but I also want to enjoy the time I have left to me.”

Lord Matlock warned, “What other woman would consent to this? It simply must be Anne. Then when you are gone, you will have all of your family to look after your widow and your child.”

“Anne is not the answer,” said Darcy. “Not by far. My mind is made up on this. I will marry, but it shall not be Anne. Even a death sentence will not change my mind in this regard.”

No matter that he said it firmly, wishing to show that he would brook no opposition, the other men did not hear him. They continued on with their arguments, first pleading and then threatening, offering reason after reason for him to marry Anne. While they were at it, they also attempted to learn what Darcy’s plan was for his marriage but on this point, he wisely kept silent.

Darcy was relieved when a note arrived from below stairs from his man. It would soon be time for the next doses of his medicine and to this end, he excused himself from the company of his relations. Had it been for any other reason, he did not think they would have permitted him to take his leave. However, as soon as he announced the need to take his medicine, they nodded and stepped back.

Darcy was seconds away from his exit when something occurred to him. “Fitzwilliam,” he said, turning back. “Why were you not with me on that Friday?”

His cousin gave his usual easy grin. “You hied off without a word to anyone of your pending departure.”

*So very odd. Did I charge the stable, saddle the horse myself? Where was Fields in all of this?*

“None of Lady Catherine’s people alerted you to my imminent leave-taking? Perhaps when my horse was being brought ‘round?’”

“No,” said Fitzwilliam smoothly. “Not at all, else I would surely

have joined you.”

His eyes were clear blue and guileless, but Darcy could not help but to suspect something was amiss. The whole idea of it was so extraordinary that—

But did it truly matter? Whatever one might say about his actions in Kent and Bromley, an esteemed physician had told him of his fate. No doubt it was the ravages of his illness that made him unable to recall those nights in April.

He said goodbye and left with no further questions.

Within the house, Lord Matlock and Colonel Fitzwilliam watched him depart, joined by Lady Matlock, who had been quickly apprised of the sad news. The three stood watching as Darcy slowly climbed into the carriage, his movements awkward and a bit pained.

At last his horses pulled away, and as they moved, Lady Matlock spoke. “It must be Anne, of course.”

“Of course,” said his lordship.

“Do not worry about it,” said Fitzwilliam. “You may depend on me to change his mind in the matter. He does not yet see reason but he surely will.”

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Mr Simmons was at his lodgings the day after his meeting with Darcy. The coat he had worn for that meeting lay on his bed. He looked at it rather longingly; he had carefully brushed it the night prior, so that it might be returned to its owner in excellent condition. It was unlikely he would ever wear one quite so fine that he was able to call his own.

Picking up his usual garb, the red coat, he slipped it on. He left his rooms for the meeting, informing his mates that he was required to be out for a bit.

It was a bit of a walk, nearly thirty minutes, but he was known for his rapid pace and made it in precisely three and twenty. It was a lovely day, and he sank onto a bench, seeing with pleasure the

children at play. He was joined moments later by the one who had hired him.

"I presume it went well?"

"Very well," Simmons confirmed. "He did not doubt me for a moment."

There was an indelicate snort. "Let us hope."

Simmons was handed a small purse. He opened it and removed the money from within, counting it quickly: fifty pounds. He smiled, thinking that he had never before held so much in his hand at once.

"If he believed you, if he was fully persuaded," he heard. "There is an additional fifty for you. If he believes you—if he acts as we think he will—I will summon you directly for the additional."

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Bingley had just received a letter of bad news when Darcy called on him.

He shook his head, seeming abstracted and sorrowful. "Our aunt," he explained. "She has passed. She was a dear, sweet woman and had never had children of her own and so doted on my sisters and me excessively. We quite liked it."

He sighed. "I must be for Scarborough as quickly as I can."

Darcy saw the marks of grief on his face and was loath to add more to it but felt he had to tell him now, lest he should learn of it otherwise. "I do not like to add to your burden my friend but I, too, have a bit of sorrowful news to share."

"Oh? What is it?"

"We should sit down." The two men were seated. Darcy paused a moment before saying, "There is not a way to soften this so I will tell you plainly. I have recently learnt that I have a rather serious illness and am not expected to live very long."

"What?" Bingley went pale and for a moment, Darcy believed he might have seen the glimmer of a tear in his eyes.

"Darcy no, that cannot be. You are the picture of vigour!"

"My appearance, I fear, deceives you," Darcy replied gently but

firmly. "I wish it were not so, but it is. You are a dear friend to me, and I felt you should be among the first to know."

"No." Bingley shook his head. "No, no, it simply cannot... No, I shall not credit it! I shall not!"

"Bingley." Darcy reached over and laid his hand on his arm. "So it is."

Bingley took a moment to absorb the news. He rested his face in his hands a moment, silent. Darcy did not interrupt him. When he raised his head again, he asked, his voice hoarse, "What is to be expected? Is there something I may do for you?"

Darcy explained it to him as best he could. Bingley at first denied it, then appeared to accept it, merely staring blankly at his friend as he gave his recitation.

When Darcy had finished, he asked, in a tone of high emotion, "Surely there is something that can be done. Another physician perhaps? How may I help you? Anything, Darcy, anything at all. We must see you recovered from this thing."

"Recovery is unlikely," said Darcy. "And I did not wish to chase false dreams in my last days. However, there is something I would like to ask of you."

"Anything," cried Bingley warmly.

"You will not comprehend my wishes until I tell you this: I intend to take a wife."

"A wife?" Bingley looked confused. "But..." He did not finish his thought.

"I know," said Darcy. "It might seem a bit untoward but my doctor has said I may expect good health through the summer. It is not yet May, so that gives me four or five months to marry and with exceeding good fortune, create a child, an heir to my estate. I will not offer for her until she knows the truth in all of its particulars, namely that she will be a widow before the year is through. I hope the fortune she will be left will be sufficient for her agreement to the scheme."

Even as he said it, he doubted it. If Elizabeth Bennet were the mercenary sort, she would have agreed to marry him at Hunsford. He pushed those doubts aside for now, however, concentrating on Bingley, who at the moment, looked rather alarmed.

"You do not mean... you cannot... Not Caroline, right? Please say you do not think to marry Caroline, for I assure you though I would not refuse she would surely make your last days a misery."

"No!" Darcy laughed. "That is not what I meant."

"Oh good," Bingley too laughed with relief. "Of course, it was foolish of me to think so—you will marry your cousin, I am sure."

That caused the laughter to cease. "Anne?" Darcy shook his head. "No, not Anne."

"No? Why not?"

Darcy shrugged. "Anne and I are not really inclined towards each other in such a way."

Having never been acquainted with the lady, Bingley could only take his word for it. "So then who?"

Darcy looked down for a moment unable to meet his friend's eye when he told him, "Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet!" Bingley looked shocked. "That is a surprise. Is it only their situation that leads you to believe she might agree to this?"

With a wry look, Darcy said, "It is my affection for her which leads me to hope she will agree to this." He told Bingley then, of all which had occurred in Kent—or most of it—including his fascination with Miss Elizabeth that he had at last acknowledged was love.

Bingley was silent and astonished throughout his recitation. When Darcy had finished, he contemplated it a moment before breaking into a wide grin. "I could never have predicted this but I am pleased! Well-pleased! And I do hope she will say yes to you; no one should depart this life without knowing the pleasures to be found in the arms of their true love."

"I agree with that sentiment wholeheartedly." Darcy smiled at his friend but became grave almost immediately after. "There is another thing I must tell you though. Something I have done which has made me very ashamed."

"Oh?"

Steeling his resolve, Darcy plunged in, explaining to his friend that he had truly believed that Miss Bennet did not return his affection for her. "I misjudged, most grievously, but by her sister's word, she is as yet affected by your absence."

"Truly?" Bingley asked with furrowed brow.

"Miss Elizabeth left me in no doubt," Darcy assured him. He had not told his friend the context of the particular conversation and was relieved that Bingley did not enquire further.

"Unfortunately I will be in Scarborough for some time," said

Bingley, his words emerging haltingly as he thought aloud. "My aunt's affairs will need some untangling I am sure but after that..."

His voice trailed off. "You will likely wish to be in Hertfordshire straightaway, will you not?"

"I had hoped you would permit me to stay at your house, but never mind that. I will be very comfortable in the inn."

"I will not hear of that," Bingley cried. "No, no, you go on to Netherfield and I will join you as soon as I can. Consider yourself at home, sir and avail yourself of every comfort."

"You are generous," Darcy said with a smile.

Bingley grinned at him with a bit of a sly look. "You might even be a married man by the time I arrive."

"We can only hope," Darcy said with a chuckle. "Forgive me now but I am growing a bit weary and must return to my house. You will no doubt wish to prepare for your journey as well."

"Ah, indeed I will for Caroline does not yet even—Darcy!" Bingley exclaimed, seeing that Darcy, as he had risen, had gotten a bit stiff legged and thus had nearly fallen over.

Darcy waved off his assistance. "It is to be expected. I am tired; that is all."

"But this is quite... this is extraordinary!" Bingley looked both appalled and distressed by what he had witnessed.

Darcy did his best to reassure him but in truth, all that he wanted was to leave, to return to his home and enjoy his bedchamber. Bingley moved about him nervously, offering an amusing variety of things he thought might be to Darcy's comfort (his whisky, his boots, a half-eaten cake, and a shawl which had been left behind by Miss Bingley—Darcy only rolled his eyes at that one).

At last his carriage came around, and Darcy breathed a sigh of relief, going toward it immediately.

"Darcy wait!" Bingley stopped him suddenly. "Just a moment. There is something I must tell you."

"What is it?" The two gentlemen stood face to face looking at one another. Bingley, though it was he who had initiated the conversation, seemed reluctant to speak.

Impatiently, Darcy prompted him, "Bingley what is it?"

"There is one thing more I must tell you."

An odd light had appeared in Bingley's eye. A cloud of sorts, making the typically blue irises a bit grey. Was he imagining it or



had Bingley's smile grown a bit forced?

A moment later it was gone and Bingley bounced on his heels, emitting the cheer that was his wont. "Oh, nothing of any consequence. Just that—there is a new stable master at Netherfield. I think you will like how he cares for your animals."

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\* \* \*

Two days later

Mr Simmons was a tall, almost gaunt sort of man. Having reached the age of five and forty, he looked nearly a decade older, having a perpetually grave countenance. His frame was exceedingly thin, mostly due to his rather odd habit of eschewing meats of any sort.

"Potatoes," he told Bingley. "And, of course, I do eat eggs and milk. It is a very healthful way to live and no animals are required to be put to their deaths that I may sustain myself."

"Oh," said Bingley thinking guiltily of the beef he had eaten with his breakfast. "Well, then; I have come to consult with you about the condition of my friend, Mr Darcy."

"Ah, Mr Darcy. Yes, a very sad case indeed."

"Yes," said Bingley. "Of course, it was quite a shock to those of us who are intimate with him."

"I should imagine it was. If there is any need for my services, I entreat you to oblige me. I would be honoured to call on such an esteemed gentleman."

Bingley was confused. "I beg your pardon; I had understood that you were there when he awoke."

Simmons shook his head. "No, 'twas his personal physician, Dunwoody, who was there, or so I had understood it."

Bingley leant back in his chair, thoroughly baffled. He was nearly certain Darcy said that this man Simmons was there—had he not? What had Darcy said precisely? And if this Simmons fellow had not examined him in truth, perhaps...?

In any case, Darcy was gone to Hertfordshire, so he could not

ask him again. Perhaps when they met again, he would clarify it.

# The Offer

For the duration of the journey from London to Hertfordshire, Darcy put aside his cares and worries for his nonexistent future and thought solely of Elizabeth.

*Time is of the essence. I need her to marry me as soon as possible, ideally by license but if she wishes banns called, the first of banns should on Sunday.*

It seemed nearly impossible, but he knew it had to be. Every day that passed was one less day he had to conceive his heir. Of course, it was also one less day he had to enjoy the pleasures of marriage with the only woman he had ever known who made him wish to marry. He did not intend to lose many such days.

He had departed London at first light, arriving in Meryton just after the noon hour was struck. He had wished to call at Longbourn immediately but alas he found himself in need of rest as soon as his

carriage pulled up at Netherfield.

He refreshed himself, intending to do all he could to overcome but found he was simply unable to do so. The sweet arms of Morpheus beckoned and refused to be denied.

It was just beyond three in the afternoon, he noted as he set out for Longbourn after his rest. Not so very late.

However late he was in arriving at Longbourn, he was soon surprised to learn he was, in truth, too early: Elizabeth, it would seem, had not yet returned from London. "She remained with her aunt and uncle after her time in Kent," Mr Bennet explained, seeming a bit curious about Darcy's inquiry. "A few days in London but we expect her later today, around four."

"Ah," said Darcy absently. "Yes, I had not considered that she would stay in London."

"I am surprised, Mr Darcy, that you have given any consideration whatsoever to my daughter's whereabouts."

Darcy returned full attention to the very sly and discerning Mr Bennet at once, mortified to feel a blush spread across his face. A moment of contemplation decided him; what was the advantage in false denials and demurrals when, with good fortune, he would be applying to this gentleman for his daughter's hand in the coming days?

"I wish to speak to your daughter, Mr Bennet, on a matter of great import. Perhaps you will grant me leave to call tomorrow?"

Mr Bennet eyed him, unspeaking and unsmiling. "A private conference?"

"Yes."

More silent study of Darcy's countenance and person ensued. At last, speaking as if each word was being painfully extracted from him, Mr Bennet said, "We will host a small neighbourhood dinner tomorrow, to welcome the girls home and permit them to see their friends. You are welcome to join us. I will inform my wife."

Darcy beamed broadly. "I thank you for the kind invitation. I am happy to accept."

"Come early," said Mr Bennet. "I will see that you have some time alone with Lizzy before the others arrive."

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The next day dawned fair and warm, and Darcy found himself with a long day in which to amuse himself. He decided he would walk towards Meryton, ostensibly to pass the time but in truth, hoping he might see Elizabeth.

Fields did not like the idea, nearly begging to call the carriage but Darcy would not hear it. "You may come behind me in the carriage if you would like," he said. "I, however, shall walk. I am not yet so frail that walking into Meryton shall fatigue me."

It was pleasant to be out, and Darcy filled his lungs with the fresh air, letting the sunshine bathe his skin. Despite his bold assurances to Fields though, by the time he reached Meryton he was indeed tired and appreciated the idea that his man and his carriage would not be long behind him.

There was a little bookshop in Meryton, and he entered it, thinking he would wait within until he saw his conveyance. As he entered, he nearly collided with none other than George Wickham.

Both men drew back, the suddenness and nature of their meeting making both immediately wary. Mr Wickham was first in the attempt to exit the awkward encounter. He stepped to the side, touching the brim of his hat, and said, "Pray excuse me."

Darcy had recovered by then, and though he was loath to owe anything to this man, he wished to settle his accounts—even this one. It should not be said that Fitzwilliam Darcy would meet his maker with the stain of implacable resentment on him, particularly towards one who had, by all reports, saved him. "A minute, George."

Mr Wickham turned cold, albeit surprised, eyes on him. "George?"

"That is still your name, is it not?"

"Very well, Fitz, what do you want?"

It was then that Darcy spied his carriage and, desirous of a bit of privacy, he gestured towards it. "A word, nothing more." Wickham nodded, looking rather curious, and the two men went towards the

carriage.

No matter what his intentions were, nor how noble his cause, Darcy could not like being in company with such a man as Wickham, and he resolved to say what needed said with due haste. The pair settled themselves in the plush carriage, George looking around him with some jealousy but saying nothing.

Fields was in the carriage, having come bearing Darcy's tinctures and remedies. He held out a bottle to his master straightaway, wordlessly asking if he required dosing. Darcy waved him off, asking him to leave them alone. Fields capped his bottle and left, but not without Wickham looking with interest at the bottle.

"There has been a great deal come between us," Darcy began.

"Such as the fact that you have become an insufferable arse," said Wickham.

Darcy ignored the insult, as well as the opportunity to point out that Wickham had become dissipated and unscrupulous. "I have recently learned of something that has changed the way that I feel about our long-standing breach. To wit: I am ill and I am dying."

Wickham said nothing, but his face altered just a bit. To what expression could not be discerned but he was no longer quite so aggrieved.

"The night that you came to my aid in Bromley—"

"Bromley?" Wickham wrinkled his brow. "When was this?"

Darcy rolled his eyes. "I suppose I can presume that for however drunk I was, you were equally so then. In any case, when my cousin came and retrieved me from that inn, he..."

For a moment, Darcy faltered. In truth, he did not know how it all had occurred. Someone sent an express and Fitzwilliam got him—when exactly?—from the inn and then what? Called the doctor immediately? Had he seen a physician at Bromley? It occurred to him that a great deal of that night was unaccounted to him.

So abstracted, he scarcely noticed that Wickham continued to speak to him. "I have no idea what you are speaking of."

"What I wish to say," Darcy recalled himself to his purpose. "You did me a good turn and I am appreciative of it. I know not what might have become of me in Bromley had you not cared for me, but that night has proven rather fateful for me."

Wickham leant back, looking bemused. "Fateful?"

"It was my actions in Bromley that led to the understanding that I have an incurable illness and will soon die."

Wickham looked down with a little frown on his face. "You Darcys might have enviable fortunes, but you lack in years to spend it."

"Perhaps so," Darcy acknowledged. "In any case, I want you to know..." The words stuck in his throat a bit. Could he say this?

"I regret the part I have played in our estrangement and I offer to you my forgiveness of your misdeeds as well."

Wickham said nothing, studying his old friend, his eyes flicking over him in a casual way.

"That is all. You may depart, if you so wish, or if there is more you would like to say, please do so. I know that neither of us is comfortable."

"Very well," Wickham said slowly. "I will offer what I can and say I am sorry for my attempt on your sister. It is money, Darcy, nothing more."

"Pray do for me this much," said Darcy earnestly. "When I am gone, when I am no longer able to protect her—leave her alone. Do not make any attempt to contact her, not even for condolence. Will you do that for me?"

"I suppose," said Wickham with a careless little shrug.

"Consider it a promise to me on my deathbed if you will. Leave her alone."

Wickham yawned, holding up both hands. "Very well, deathbed vow and all that implies. By the way, what is wrong with you?"

"A disease of the brain," Darcy replied, satisfied to have gotten as much as he had. "So noted by the loss of symmetry in my face."

Wickham was not impressed. "You look to me as you always have though I see you are rather grey-coloured. Get a bit of sun on your face, that will do for that."

"How kind of you to notice," said Darcy drily. "I will take your advice into consideration."

Wickham shrugged, pausing to look at him a moment more before excusing himself. "I must be off now. A military life is not one given to time for the individual pursuits."

Darcy nodded, and with that, Wickham was gone.

As the carriage began the journey back to Netherfield, Darcy reflected that the truly odd part of the meeting was that Wickham had not requested any money. He shook his head in disgust. How drunk had Wickham been that he did not even recall being in Bromley?

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Darcy arrived at Longbourn at the hour appointed, such anxiety and nervousness plaguing him throughout his journey that he could scarcely remain still atop his horse.

He was shown in by Mrs Hill, who looked at him curiously but said only that which was appropriate. Elizabeth awaited him which made him still more anxious; evidently her father had informed him of the need for an interview. She said nothing, silent and grave while Mrs Hill saw to his comfort. Then both went into the sitting room.

“This is a surprise, Mr Darcy,” she said at last.

“I know it is and please know that I am exceedingly grateful to you and your father for arranging this time for us to speak.”

She looked like she might say more, but he interrupted her. “Would you sit, please?”

Looking wary, she did as he asked, perching on the edge of a light-coloured settee. He remained standing, his hands clasped behind his back.

“I wish first to say how terribly sorry I am for all that I have done which has caused you, in any measure, grief or embarrassment or vexation. From the very first moment of our acquaintance, I have not treated you as I should, and my regrets in this are many.”

She said nothing to that.

“I also regret, heartily, the offensive nature of my proposal. I should not have spoken of your family as I did, nor should I have done anything that hurt you. Even my letter—did you perchance read it?”

“I did.”

“Thank you. I wrote it with the intent of explaining myself, wishing you to think better of me but I do realise now it was written in a dreadful bitterness of spirit. So this too I beg forgiveness for.”

She gave a slight nod and half a smile. “Of course.”

“I have also spoken to Bingley,” he added. “Regarding the fact



that I was sorely mistaken in my opinions on your sister's affections for him. He knows the truth of the matter now."

"Yet he did not return to Netherfield with you."

"I believe he shall join me before long," Darcy said. "A beloved aunt in Scarborough has passed and he is required to go settle her affairs for her."

"I see." After a brief pause, she added, still speaking with a bit of reserve, "I would like to offer my apologies as well, for so judging you about the situation with Mr Wickham."

"Think nothing of that," he replied immediately.

"No." She shook her head, looking down. "I am ashamed of my behaviour. I should not have heard his lies, nor should I have believed him so readily and above all, I should not have contributed to the spread of them. I am sorry."

"Very well," he said with a faint smile. "As you have so generously forgiven me, so too are you wholeheartedly forgiven. I must own, however, that even before you spoke, I harboured no ill against you. It was that which I adore in you most that caused you to believe Wickham's tales—your compassionate heart."

She looked up quickly, turning pink from his compliment. "Thank you." She dropped her eyes again, not seeing when he moved quickly into the seat beside her.

She rose immediately on feeling his weight settle next to her. "It seems we have it settled between us then so let us return to the party and—"

"Not just yet if you please. There is something else." His heart began to pound furiously. "I need to ask something of you...um, ah...a favour of sorts. Rather a large one."

"Very well." Hesitantly, she lowered herself back into the seat she had so recently vacated. "What is it?"

The words were at once lodged firmly in his throat. The enormity of what he was about to request came upon him. It might have been easier, had she shown any sign of interest in him, but she did not. She was indifferent—an improvement, perhaps, from having formerly despised him but minimal at best.

Candour, in the fullest sense, was required, he decided. She might pity him, it was true, but there was no point in maintaining pride at such a time.

"I have had a bit of bad news recently," he said, his voice quiet and grave. "Exceedingly bad, in fact. I have learnt that I am

afflicted with a very grave illness. I expect that this summer shall be my last."

She startled, her posture growing stiff as she quickly turned her head to look at him directly. She was, he thought, rather satisfyingly distressed looking.

"But... but how? You seem quite... no, surely not. It cannot be true."

"I am afraid it is very true," he told her. "I have heard it myself from an expert. If you will note my face is not... I am losing symmetry, not so alarming in and of itself, but it is indicative of a greater problem within my brain, a problem that will cause my demise in but a few months."

She stared for a moment, agape. He was shocked when she raised her hands, looking almost dreamlike as she laid her fingers on his cheeks, tracing lightly over the contours of his face. "You seem perfectly symmetrical to me, sir."

"No," he said ruefully. "If you look closely you will see that my ears are not quite the same size, my dimples no longer align and one brow is lengthened in comparison to the other."

She did indeed look closely, but her judgment was evidently not the same as his. She gave him a brief, puzzled look and then said, her voice trembling a little, "Your physicians must surely know better than I but...allow me to say how very sorry I am to hear it."

"I will admit to you it is a struggle to accept it myself but I must. I will die, and soon, and all I can do for it is to settle my affairs and see that there is nothing left to answer for when I am gone."

He gave her a rueful smile and it seemed to undo her.

"Excuse me." She rose, hastily, going to the window and looking out, her back to him. He watched as she drew deep breaths and eventually began rustling about in her skirts, seeking something. A handkerchief?

He rose and went to her, offering his own. Though he stood behind her, he could see her face reflected in the glass, and see the shine of tears on her cheeks. "Elizabeth, pray, do not weep for me."

"Do not weep for you?" She half laughed and half sobbed. She took the handkerchief and pressed it to her eyes and turned, finding herself very nearly within his arms. "I am so very sorry. It is not fair, not fair at all."

He was moved by her sincerity and so moved, reached for her almost unthinkingly, pressing her to his chest. Who could not wish

to touch someone so dear to them at such a time? He did not wrap his arms about her, permitting himself just one arm, pressed lightly against her back. "Thank you."

She allowed his embrace for a moment. He felt her shuddering breath as she gained control over herself before pulling back slightly and looking up into his face.

"I begin to think you really are good," she said. "My prejudice blinded me to the truth of you before but how admirable that at such a time, you do not succumb to pity but rather move forward, mindful to those who depend upon you to the end."

"I would be lying if I did not tell you that pity and despair do haunt me at times," he admitted. "Sorrow, some anger...I cannot deny it. Those things do me no good however, and I would like to live out my last days with some pleasure if I may. That is where I need you."

"Me?"

"Let us sit once again," he said.

This time, they sat together with no reservation. Her eyes bore a bit of dampness around them, although she maintained a determined air of equanimity.

"I must apply to you for something of great importance to me," he said. "It is no small matter though, and were it not for my affection for you, I could never dare broach the subject."

"Anything, anything at all."

"No, no, you must not say that," he said with a little laugh. "What I will ask is something that will forever alter the course of your existence. It cannot be given lightly."

"Forever alter the course of my existence?" Elizabeth gave him a rather charming look, somewhat teasing. "Such sweet words Mr Darcy, and with a hint of a mystery. You must know such sentiments can only entice me."

He felt his heart leap a bit and hoped it was only due to her and not to his illness. "Well, I must do as I can to raise my prospects."

Her teasing look became quizzical as he continued.

"I spoke the truth when I told you at Hunsford that I loved you. I have loved you for several months now, though the precise moment cannot be known for it took me some time to recognise it for what it was. However, it has been some time that I knew you were the only woman I could ever truly love, the only one who I could imagine marrying, and the only one with whom I would wish

to raise a family.”

He cleared his throat. “I need a wife, Elizabeth. I would like to see that the future of my name and my estate is secured before I depart this mortal coil, but I could not entrust those things to anyone but someone I held in the highest regard.”

Her eyes raised now, astonished and a bit alarmed, and her mouth dropped, forming a perfect O.

“You,” he said. “I wish only for you to aid me in these, my last days.”

It was hopeful, he thought, that she did not immediately deny him.

“Think of this,” he said, his voice growing a bit stronger. “A few months of marriage to me and you will have security your whole life long. I will leave you well cared-for, whether or not we have a child.”

He reached into his pocket, withdrawing a paper that he handed to her. It was folded. After a questioning look in his direction, she unfolded it, looking at it carefully.

Pemberley and all of its holdings were laid before her. To her credit, she did not gasp or in any manner give way to her shock, but then again, he supposed he had already shocked her so deeply that to shock her further might be impossible.

“This will be your part of it,” he told her, pointing at the page. “No matter what, this sum is yours, wholly yours, whether or not you bear my child, whether you produce an heir, whether you...” Brief momentary distaste arose in his throat and seized his breath for a moment, “...marry again. I mean, of course you shall marry again. I hope you marry, I want nothing but happiness for you.”

“I do not... I hardly...” she stammered a bit. “This is very generous, Mr Darcy.”

“No, it is not, not really,” he told her. She looked up at him. “If you think of it carefully, I believe you will know that I am asking a great deal of you. I need someone who can carry on. Someone witty and clever, someone who I can depend upon to maintain my holdings and raise my child if fortune should so smile upon us.”

She took a deep breath, re-folding the paper he had given her and handing it to him. With a quick gesture, he indicated that she should keep it.

“Moreover, I would like it if we could... um...” Anxiety rendered him stupid; he had no idea how to ask for that he wanted most.

Elizabeth smiled with such kindness that he allowed himself to hope.

"I know," he said with renewed determination, "you do not love me but if possible I would like to feel...cared for. I do not ask you to pretend to some great love for me, but friendship and caring... I would like that."

"Of course," she said immediately. "Of course, I could never agree to such a thing intending to treat you with animosity or spite."

"Thank you," he said with an embarrassed smile. "Of course there is also the matter of..."

She waited patiently.

"Perhaps this point is obvious but for a child, an heir for Pemberley... that is truly what has driven me to overcome my natural disinclination towards... Who knows whether Georgiana will ever marry or what will come..."

He stopped, realising he was babbling like a madman. Gathering as much composure as he could, he said, "I would not wish you to enter into this unless you understood that it was not merely marriage I wanted. I need... that is to say, we would have to..."

She dropped her eyes, blushing deeply. "I understand."

All had been said, and now he wanted only for her answer. He regarded her quietly as she considered his offer.

"So you wish to marry me. To marry me, and carry on just as we would in any marriage of true affection, in hopes of conceiving a child."

"Yes," he said; and then he teased her, "It is not so very much to ask, is it?"

She smiled absently. "I need to think about this," she said at last. "May I have until Friday? I wish to consider it all, carefully."

"Of course," he told her. "Such a decision cannot be made lightly."

"You will likely wish to marry immediately."

"If you would not object to it. I could get a licence."

She nodded. "Very well then. I understand the offer you have made me."

He rose then, extending his hand to assist her to her feet. She took it, rising and standing before him. She did not move right away.

"I am not insensible to the compliment of your affection," she

said, looking into his eyes. "I recognise that you honoured me in asking me as you have to do this for you. However, may I ask just one thing?"

"Of course."

"What about your cousin?"

She had not removed her hand from his, allowing it to rest in his palm. He believed he likely should not and yet he did, begin to caress her knuckles with his thumb.

"I had often heard you were promised to her and the advantages of such a union are considerable. It seems that this would have been the easiest solution to your dilemma."

"It is the clear answer, is it not? And I was most surprised that my uncle and Fitzwilliam seemed to think it a forgone conclusion. But as you have noted, I am selfish and though I have tried to attend to those things you have charged me with, I am nonetheless determined that my last days shall include much joy and pleasure."

He waited until she looked at him and added, "Only you, Elizabeth, can bring me the happiness I have so longed for."

# To Marry a Man for His Library

They were a large party, as large as the dining room at Longbourn could hold without someone sitting on their dinner companion's lap. Everyone wished to welcome Elizabeth and Jane home again and knowing that Mr Darcy was inexplicably in attendance could only make them more eager to come.

He was not seated with her at dinner. Her mother—not wholly aware of what had transpired but sensing that the settling of a daughter might ensue—seated him next to herself thinking such a thing would gratify his dignity. Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief, seeing the progress of the first course; it would seem her mother was in sufficient awe of Mr Darcy that it rendered her rather silent.

And yet, she had to admit, his manner toward her mother was not displeasing. He had offered a compliment, or so it would seem from Mrs Bennet's deep blush.

“Well Lizzy,” said Mr Bennet, who had requested his favourite daughter sit next to him. “We are all here to celebrate your return but I wonder if the gathering will soon boast another purpose.”

“No Papa,” she said quietly. “I think that the purpose of tonight’s party shall remain as it was.”

“I am surprised to hear it.”

“Mr Darcy wished to make amends for his slights upon me earlier,” she said absently, watching as he listened, with apparent interest, to Sir William. She had no idea what Sir William spoke of but given his somewhat preening air, she guessed it was something to do with his knighthood.

“Was that all?”

Elizabeth did not answer, feeling her father’s eyes upon her. Fortunately, she was spared from answering him, as Mr Goulding asked him a question. The two men were soon engaged in their own subject, leaving Elizabeth to her thoughts.

For as much as she had contemplated the startling and offensive nature of Mr Darcy’s proposal, as well as the information contained in the letter he had given her the day following, she had given relatively little thought to his declarations of love. Those she had dismissed outright.

He loves you, she thought looking at him. It was an odd sense that gave her, to imagine the mighty and proud Mr Darcy had fallen in love with her. All the beauties of the ton, all the ladies who had so sought his favour had failed and she had succeeded, where she had not tried. She had secured his love. It filled her with an odd sort of gratification that she supposed must be akin to vanity.

Could she do this for him? Could she give him what he asked for, a few months of happiness, some affection... It was evidently something for which she alone was able. She alone had the power to grant him this wish in his last days.

How could she refuse? Would it not make her the most unfeeling sort of lady, to deny his request? For a few months’ happiness, he had offered a fortune to her, a fortune that would enable her to live comfortably for the rest of her life, raise the prospects of her sisters, and secure the future of her family. In truth, he had offered her everything she had ever wished for; not so much the fortune but the independence it offered her. She could marry again or not, as her inclination directed her. She could travel, she could help her family... she would have full access to the Pemberley library, of



which she had heard much.

The thought nearly made her laugh. *Will you marry a man for his library, Lizzy?* She asked herself. She sobered then, thinking, *Well, perhaps I will, after all.*

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Darcy had seen Elizabeth's eyes upon him at various times throughout the dinner but whatsoever she thought, she gave no indication of it on her countenance. He could only hope and pray that she considered his offer.

She was sitting with her sister and one of the Miss Longs when he entered the drawing room. He approached them, only to find that both her sister and Miss Long quickly departed. Did they find his company disagreeable?

Elizabeth assured him they did not. "I told them we had some matters to discuss between us."

"I see. Do you suppose that they imagine the matters are of a romantic nature?"

Elizabeth laughed lightly. "Whenever ladies speak, all matters are imagined to be of a romantic bent."

They fell into silence for a moment; Elizabeth broke it, asking, "So tell me—was your sister aware of your plan in coming here?"

"I have not discussed the particulars of it with her," he admitted. "How much she suspected I cannot guess."

"Perhaps if I should agree to this plan," Elizabeth began, speaking cautiously. "It might be best if I met her before we married."

"I am sure she would like to return here with me," he said. "Unless of course you would prefer to marry in London?"

Elizabeth reddened. "I cannot say. It might be best to discuss where the wedding is held after we are certain that the wedding will occur."

"Forgive me, I have gotten ahead of myself," he said. "In any case, no matter what, I will not leave you with an easy task so far as

Georgiana is concerned.”

“No?”

“Her spirits have never wholly recovered since last summer.”

She nodded slightly to indicate that she understood his meaning.

“I fear that my demise will affect her greatly.”

Elizabeth looked down and swallowed a bit hard. “Yes, I should think so.” She then laid her hand atop his, and they sat for a moment in a companionable silence.

What Elizabeth considered in those minutes he knew not; for him it was an enjoyable silence, as he reflected on what joy it was to have someone who knew his deepest concerns and fears, someone with whom he might open his heart completely.

Elizabeth spoke at last, saying, “You are close to her, I presume?”

“As close as two siblings with twelve years between them can be,” he said. “I had begun to enjoy seeing the changes in her, as she moved away from girlhood and became an adult. I was looking forward to seeing our relationship change from what it is now, in which I have something of a paternal role, into being true siblings and, I had hoped, friends.”

He felt the shadow of sorrow pass over him and did what he could to put it behind him quickly. Elizabeth must have seen for she too hastened to a different subject.

“And what would we do after we married? Go to Pemberley? Or remain in London?”

“That is a difficult question,” he said. He shifted on the seat a bit, wishing to be closer to her. She did not object or move away, which he found encouraging. “When I have imagined our marriage —”

“You have imagined our marriage?” She looked at him with surprise.

“Yes,” he admitted with a little embarrassment. “Perhaps too much. I suppose I should have done better to imagine my proposal with greater conscience.”

Her eyes flew wide, and she leant back in astonishment, her hand on her chest; then, she laughed. Such a delight it was to be the founder of her amusement!—he found himself casting about, hoping for something else to say to make her laugh more. “I have shocked you, I see. Forgive me; one must remember such catastrophes with humour.”

The last made her laugh still more. "You astonished me, sir. I could never have imagined that I would have been sitting with you and laughing at that night, particularly in so short a period."

"I recall you once said that follies and nonsense diverted you. I am afraid I have given you far too many examples of those in our brief acquaintance." He paused a moment; then with a bit of wry humour, said "Do not believe that I failed to notice how you hid your smile that night at Netherfield when I said that pride is kept under regulation by real superiority of mind."

She laughed again, and it was a true delight to him. "Oh, pray do not make me account for all of my hidden smiles."

"With such as my behaviour was at times, I suppose I gave you a great many smiles to conceal. I learnt a painful truth at Netherfield, and I am afraid it exposed, at times, my rather strong understanding to ridicule."

She leaned towards him a bit, seeming friendly. "I know you too well to believe you have any understanding to ridicule, but pray tell me—what painful truth did you learn at Netherfield?"

He leaned in as she had done. They were very close now, and he imagined that the rest of the party might notice their intimacy—if they cared to look. He found he was rather indifferent to what anyone else thought of it. Elizabeth was smiling at him and laughing, and he cared for nothing else. "The painful truth is that when a man is falling in love, attempting to deny or resist it can only lead to utter foolishness."

She blushed, deeply and leaned back a bit; not in an unfriendly manner but (as he learnt when he looked over his shoulder) because they had drawn the notice of Sir William Lucas. Thankfully, that gentleman was not compelled to join them.

Darcy too straightened a bit, assuming a more appropriate posture. "But I was speaking to you of our imagined marriage."

"Yes," said she. "Tell me what you imagined for us."

"I will admit that I anticipated, with great eagerness, treating you to the amusements of London," he said first. "I know you enjoy the theatre, and perhaps opera as well?"

"Oh yes—I have only been to it once but I adored it."

"So that, and, of course, I think all ladies like to shop?"

She laughed. "Yes, I like to shop very well indeed, but surely you would not anticipate squiring me about to the shops?"

"Here is my secret," he told her. In an exaggerated whisper, he

said, "I abhor shopping, but I believe I would abhor being without your company even more."

She laughed, just a little this time, her colour still heightened and her eyes sparkling. He began to understand those like Bingley and Fitzwilliam who flirted and cajoled... To have placed such a look on a lady's countenance was intoxicating indeed.

"So we would shop and perhaps grace a very selected few with affirmative answers to invitations—just those who I believed you would find agreeable. I never imagined that I would have much inclination toward sharing you, not until we had been married two or three years at least."

"Two or three years?" She laughed again. "I assure you sir, you would be longing for variety by the time two or three months was elapsed."

"Not hardly," he told her. "But this is only in London in any case. What I most long to show you is Pemberley."

"I will admit, I am very eager to see it," she said. "I have never heard anything less than the highest praise for it."

"Yes," he said wistfully. "I suppose my partiality should not surprise you but even if it were not my home, I would tell you that Pemberley was, above all, the most delightful place I had ever seen."

She smiled, encouraging him to continue speaking.

"I have imagined showing you Pemberley so many times; it seems astonishing you have not been there in truth. I know—or at least believe I know—how well you would like the park and suppose you might enjoy reading on the benches by the maze. There is a lovely little folly that overlooks quite a distance and on a clear day one might even see the river. In the house itself, there are many very enjoyable places as well."

"The library," Elizabeth interjected. "I would be there for days I imagine, to even choose which book to read first."

"Perhaps so," he said with an indulgent smile. "I hope I do not sound intolerably proud when I say few families have a finer library than that at Pemberley."

He might have continued on, save for the fact that Sir William--having given them sufficient time for love-making--had come to join them. Darcy immediately rose to his feet.

"Sir William, you have come to my assistance before, to no avail. I entreat you, sir, do your best this time, that I might

successfully secure this lady's hand for a dance or two."

Sir William looked a bit surprised at being so addressed.

Darcy continued on, casting a teasing look at Elizabeth. "You must recall it, sir. This lady, in your house, flatly refused to stand up with me. I was made desolate by such a rejection."

"Desolate, Mr Darcy?" Elizabeth laughed. "I should think not. You carried on admirably through the rest of the evening."

"No." Darcy shook his head. "I assure you, I was despairing. I am only rather adept at concealing my distress—just as you are adept at concealing your smiles."

Elizabeth was grinning while Sir William looked confused. He appeared uncertain as to whether he must intercede or laugh along.

Darcy decided to help the poor man in his consternation. "Sir William, I beg you, sir. Help me that I might avoid such humiliation again. I must have a dance, immediately. As intimate as you are with Miss Elizabeth, you must surely know how she is persuaded."

"Dear Eliza! You must not tease Mr Darcy so!" Sir William took up the charge eagerly. "You would not be so cruel to deny me the pleasure of seeing you dance, would you? And with such an estimable partner!"

Elizabeth paused a fraction of a second too long, causing Sir William to lean close, and whisper loudly, "Dear girl, it would not do to offend Mr Darcy! Dance with him, child. It will do you no harm. Look over there, a charming set has formed."

To say a set had formed would have been a gross overstatement of the matter. Two or three couples made the arrangement, but Darcy did not care. Such considerations hardly mattered; what did matter was time with Elizabeth, talking to her and making her smile and laugh.

Sir William continued in his entreaties, but Elizabeth was not hearing him. She was looking at Darcy, an impish sort of smile on her face, and a lighthearted glow in her eyes. At last she rose and extended her hand toward Darcy.

"Very well, then, let us dance."

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Colonel Fitzwilliam responded to his father's summons, joining him in his bedchamber where he was dressing for some party. He dismissed his man immediately on seeing his son.

"There is a bit of this that does not sit well with me," said his lordship as soon as his valet had been sent off. "I might be an old fool, but this feels like a bit of mischief afoot."

Fitzwilliam sat down, making himself comfortable at his father's small writing desk. "How so?"

"Firstly, how did you fail to notice Darcy leaving? I know my sister, and if a chambermaid sneezes in the pasture, she knows about it."

"I cannot answer for Lady Catherine but as for me: Darcy and I do not spend every spare moment at Rosings in the company of one another. It was to be our last day there. He did not appear for breakfast, and I presumed he had taken a tray in his room. I knew he was planning to spend the day in Lady Catherine's fields so that his horse was gone did not surprise me."

"And when did you discern there was a problem? When he failed to appear for dinner?"

Fitzwilliam nodded. "Lady Catherine was vexed, to say the least. She held dinner for an hour waiting for him and then when he was not there, we began to look around for him. His clothing was still in his bedchamber and no one, not even Lady Catherine, was aware of any intention to leave. Of course, we alerted the magistrate straightaway, organised a search on the grounds, that sort of thing. We had people, the tenants and so forth looking for him until we received the express, right around nightfall."

Lord Matlock frowned. "And no one had seen him leave? No one had any notion of it?"

"No one."

"The express was from Wickham himself?"

"So it said. It was the script of an educated gentleman, although I have not the least notion of how George Wickham signs himself, and naturally the seal was plain."

"A strange business," Lord Matlock concluded. "I suppose it matters not, for, in the end, he will not survive it. I wonder if it is due to the disease that he acted so strangely."

"Perhaps," his son agreed.

“And now he is off chasing some country miss in Hertfordshire.” Lord Matlock shook his head. “You must follow him, of course. He must marry Anne.”

Fitzwilliam, though loath to be at odds with his family, ventured to say, “I think it rather unjust, that the rest of us should be charged with covering the whiff of an old, old scandal that has been the business of Anne alone.”

“It is not an old, old scandal because as yet no one knows about it,” said Lord Matlock. “Should the truth come out, it will be fresh indeed.

After a brief pause, while his lordship struggled with his slippers, he added, “Let us not forget, if Darcy does not marry her, you might just be called upon to take the duty.”

Fitzwilliam sighed. “I will not marry Anne and in any case, Lady Catherine would not have me. A second son with no fortune to bolster up Rosings—insupportable, in her eyes at least.”

“Count yourself lucky,” said his lordship, with a little grunt.

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The organiser of the whole scheme sat back, reading the express that had just been received from London. Darcy had, by all accounts, swallowed the whole of it with remarkably few questions.

“I suppose when one presumes that he is more clever than anyone else he knows, the notion of being played for a fool does not enter one's head.” The words, as well as the subsequent chuckle, were heard by no one save the servant who stood waiting with the pipe.

“Do not just stand there, light it for me.”

The pipe was quickly taken, without much gratitude being afforded to the servant who was dismissed quickly. *People about all the time, always crowding me and taking my freedom! Insupportable it shall not be thus for long.*

Another servant entered, letter in hand. “An express has arrived.”

The letter was taken, and a brief glance cast over it. With a slight chuckle, the servant was ordered, "Take it and toss it in the fire."

"Excuse me, but—" "Do it now!"

And so it was done.

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Anne de Bourgh stared sullenly at the plate in front of her. Her lack of appetite displeased her mother exceedingly, and thus Anne had long ago mastered the art of self-inflicted starvation. The pleasure gained in seeing her mother so vexed far surpassed any hunger pangs she might feel. In any case, there was a good supply of biscuits in her chamber.

Her mother went on, loudly discussing her wedding. "When everyone has begun to return to their estates, we will go to London and begin the preparation for your clothes. You have some things that will be suitable but not nearly enough for your station. I should imagine that, as Mrs Darcy, you will often be—"

Through gritted teeth, Anne said, "For the last time. I. Will not. Marry. Darcy."

Her mother stopped speaking, her mouth snapping closed into a firm, angry line. Her nostrils flared, and her eyes narrowed. *She looks like a pig*, thought Anne. *She wants only for a few snorts*. The thought might have made her giggle were she not so angry herself. She resolved to share her observation with Mrs Jenkinson later, that they might enjoy a bit of mirth together.

Her mother dismissed the servants with a flick of her hand, and it was then that Anne knew she was due for some severe and likely sustained chastisement. Her mother had been nearly relentless since the days prior to Darcy's visit and in the face of his sudden and mysterious decampment.

"Who will have you if not Darcy?"

"I do not care if no one will have me," said Anne. "I do not wish to marry."



“What of an heir?”

“I already have one,” Anne hissed at her, permitting her face to pinch into the ugliest sneer she could manage.

Lady Catherine drew back, somehow managing to narrow her eyes even more than they were previously. *Can she still see?* Anne wondered idly.

“No, you most certainly do not.”

Anne picked up her chocolate and took the tiniest sip possible before slamming the cup down again onto the sauce. Alas, it did not break as she had hoped it would.

“Say as you wish Mother, but you will die, and I will leave the estate to my sweet little Robert.”

“You will be the shame of everyone you know! You will not be recognised anywhere by anyone of significance.”

Anne shrugged.

“You will marry Darcy, and then you will have the respectability of a wife,” her mother said stridently.

“He will not marry me any more than I will marry him.”

“He will,” said Lady Catherine. “His mother has promised him.”

“Oh please,” said Anne. “Mothers cannot promise away their infants!”

“Darcy has heard it repeated these many years and surely has known—”

“Yes, he knows the wishes of our mothers, but whatever his mother’s exertions were, his father made him promise never to marry me,” Anne said triumphantly.

“George Darcy was an idiot.”

“I loved Uncle George,” Anne retorted. “He was not an idiot.”

“You will marry your cousin.”

Anne rose, smiling meanly through the red haze of anger which enveloped her. “You cannot make me. I am seven and twenty; I have my own fortune... I do not depend on you.”

The footmen were still away from the room, so she took the opportunity to slam her chair into the table, watching with satisfaction as it bounced off the table and then fell down. The noise summoned one of the men to look in, and she took the opportunity to exit quickly, her skirts brushing behind her with a satisfying swish.

Her mother called after her; she ignored her.

She hastened to dress, informing Mrs Jenkinson that she would

take a drive. Few people but Mrs Jenkinson knew of Anne's love of driving, and most particularly, driving fast. She spent money on very few things, save for her horses, which were unquestionably the fastest horses she could find. Her cousins were at least of some use in that regard, although what they believed was her use of those horses, she knew not. She made silly comments about how pretty they were and tied ribbon in their manes often enough to make her interests appear frivolous.

If only Darcy and Fitzwilliam knew that she would handily best them at any race they chose to run against her, she thought with satisfaction. She had gone to Tunbridge and back once in under three hours, Bromley too. No one had ever even suspected she was not napping in her bedchamber while she was out racing about the countryside, enjoying the dubious bit of freedom afforded to her.

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"Three dances Lizzy?" Jane asked as she walked into the bedchamber she shared with her younger sister.

"Was it three?" Elizabeth laughed awkwardly. "I must have lost count."

"Oh it certainly was, and do not think our mother is not already planning wedding clothes suited for Mrs Darcy."

Elizabeth said nothing to that, merely looking down at her hands. Too late she realised she had a telling sort of smile on her face.

"You do not deny that! Have you changed your mind about Mr Darcy?"

With a little sigh, Elizabeth decided on the spot to confide in her sister. She first told her of Mr Darcy's mysterious illness, as well as his unexpected offer to her. Jane's kind heart was naturally affected by such sorrow and she immediately felt all sympathy toward Mr Darcy.

"So you think I should do it?" Elizabeth asked at Jane anxiously.

"You appeared to rather enjoy his company tonight," Jane said.

Then, she ventured, "In fact, one who did not know you better would say you looked rather... rather like a lady who was falling in love."

"Oh Jane," Elizabeth demurred but she could think of no more compelling argument against her sister than that. "He was so very different from the Mr Darcy I had known before."

"Different how?"

"We laughed and we talked and...the time just flew by."

"I have always felt that there was a great deal more good in Mr Darcy than you would admit."

Elizabeth nodded slowly. "At this point, I would have to agree with you."

# The Failed Scheme

Mr Collins was shown in to Lady Catherine's drawing room, immediately beginning the bowing and scraping he believed was due his esteemed patroness. Miss de Bourgh sat swaddled in layers of shawls and blankets in the corner of the room. He cast nervous glances in her way as he went about it, but she was disinterested in his actions.

Lady Catherine at last bid him stop, urging him to state the purpose of his call.

"I fear I have some ill tidings," said he, a twisting worm of anxiety moving through his gut.

"It is not that situation with the tenants again is it? For I have so strenuously advised—"

"That is not it," said Mr Collins, as a bead of sweat rolled down his cheek. He sent another glance towards Miss de Bourgh. "It is a

case of some delicacy perhaps too delicate for Miss de Bourgh's sensibilities?"

"Miss de Bourgh will remain," came a thin but firm voice from within the heap of shawls.

"Very well, very well." Another bead of sweat rolled down and Collins shifted uncomfortably on his feet, wishing the ladies would invite him to sit. "I have recently learnt that Miss Elizabeth Bennet shall marry Mr Darcy."

There was a short moment of silence until Lady Catherine pronounced, dismissively, "Scandalous tattle. He would never so forget his family and his station."

"I have it on good authority," said Mr Collins. He then told her of a large gathering at Longbourn where Mr Darcy's attentions to his fair cousin were not unnoticed, including standing up with her to dance not once but three times.

Lady Catherine was first disparaging of such intelligence, saying it was nothing short of slander but as his recitation continued, she became less incredulous and more angry.

"It has also been told throughout Meryton," said Mr Collins, "... that Mr Darcy is suffering from a strange malady, one which shall cause his untimely demise and it is this which compels him to marry. Perhaps it might explain his odd behaviour as well."

There was a prolonged silence in which Lady Catherine grew angrier and angrier with each passing moment, drumming her fingers on her chair and scowling as she pondered. Mr Collins continued to look at Miss de Bourgh, in an attempt to discern her worry for the situation, but she remained unmoved, turning her head to look out the window in contemptuous indifference.

Mr Collins decided that his best option, in this circumstance, was to come to the aid of both ladies, giving them his good counsel, such as was afforded by his status as a clergyman.

"Everything has a season," he misquoted. "A time to weep and to mourn, a time to live and be born... think of the lilacs, how they toil not—"

"Quiet!" Lady Catherine barked. "Though these tales are obvious falsehoods, to preserve my addled nephew's reputation, I shall be forced to intercede. I cannot dislike anything more than the impertinence of those who gossip about their betters! Leave us, Mr Collins. We must make plans to travel straightaway."

Mr Collins cast one last fearful glance at Miss de Bourgh, who

remained unaffected. Slowly he rendered his parting bows and fatuous remarks and then, careful not to turn his back on her, left Lady Catherine's drawing room.

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Elizabeth asked for a bit of time—not too much for she understood that time was the one thing of which he had little to give—so just a few days. It was not an unreasonable request, for she was making a very important decision, but Darcy was impatient.

Darcy spent as much time with her as she would permit. He took her on drives in a curricule from Netherfield, and long walks through the countryside. He sat in the drawing room with her sisters and her, and took advantage of every invitation afforded them.

There was a small party at Haye Park one evening, just cards and supper, but he enjoyed being there with her. "Boys against the girls," she teased as they made up the tables for whist.

"Is that not usually the way?" he replied with equal levity. In a lower voice, he said, "In any case, I would far rather sit next to you than partner with you and be forced to have a table between us."

They could and did discuss everything and anything, although this time, Darcy took great care to ensure she enjoyed his conversation as much as he enjoyed hers.

"You need not agree with me so much you know," she said one day as they walked the path to Oakham Mount.

Very seriously, he replied, "I never imagined, until that night at Hunsford, that you saw my conversation as an injury to your cleverness. I am merely now trying to avoid such misunderstandings."

"But now that I do understand you better, I will not think you seek to humiliate or censure me by your dissent."

"I am mortified that you ever thought so."

"Silly is it not?" She gave him the little arch smile that he was coming to believe was his alone. "Now that I am coming to know you better, I cannot imagine why I ever attributed such horrid

intentions to you.”

He gently caressed the hand that was within the crook of his arm. “You inspire in me the wish to be a better man.”

“And you inspire in me the wish to know more fully the man you truly are, which I suspect is a very good man already.” She gave him a little sidelong glance accompanied by a sweet smile.

They had then reached the top and paused for a moment, admiring the view. Rather, Elizabeth admired the landscape before her. He admired only her.

“I have been thinking more about...about this offer you have made me. I do have one particular concern.”

“What is it?”

“Does not your family expect you to marry your cousin? And what are Miss de Bourgh’s feelings on the matter?”

“I can relieve your mind on one score and assure you that my cousin has no more wish to marry me than do I to marry her.”

“No?” She looked at him curiously. “Why not?”

He paused for a moment, trying to determine how best to tell her. “Anne is in love with a gentleman from an estate near Tunbridge.”

“Will they marry?”

“They cannot.”

“Because of her health?”

“Because my aunt would never allow it.” Darcy’s lips twitched. “He is a former lover of Lady Catherine.”

“Lady Catherine’s lover!” Elizabeth missed a step, stumbling and nearly toppling over. Darcy grabbed her, holding her upright—perhaps a bit longer than was needful but one never could be too careful. Her eyes flew to his face, wide and astonished and then she laughed, quickly pressing her hand to her lips.

She quickly made herself sober. “So Miss de Bourgh’s suitor was once...”

“Lady Catherine used to be fond of entertaining,” he explained. “She would have many gatherings of the neighbourhood gentry, including this particular gentleman who was many years her junior and a widower. At some time, they became involved in a romance although they were not... well, it was never tended toward marriage, I will assure you of that.

“Then one day, he saw Anne, who at that time was of an age with your sister Lydia, I believe. Despite their difference in age—he

was then in his mid-thirties I believe—they were soon in love. He broke things off with Lady Catherine straightaway, which, of course, must have made for an awkward conversation when he informed her of his intention to marry her daughter.”

“Dear heavens!” Elizabeth breathed in shock. “A novel could scarcely be less extraordinary.”

“To be sure,” agreed Darcy. “Of course, Lady Catherine said no, and Anne then set about doing as she could to force her hand, so to speak.”

“Oh,” said Elizabeth clearly not comprehending. Then, understanding arrived and she said, “Oh, I see.”

“A son was born, and Anne nearly died from the exertion of it. When she was again well, she was told her son had died. She went a bit deranged from the grief of it and often spoke of wishing to kill herself. A number of experts were consulted, and it was decided that she was suffering from chronic melancholia.”

“Oh no,” Elizabeth said sympathetically. “That is sad, very sad indeed.”

“Somewhere in the course of these events, Lady Catherine renewed her interest in betrothing me to Anne. She and my mother had made some such plans while we were yet in their cradles, but nothing serious had ever been thought of it. However, with this business, my aunt believed it my duty to wed Anne, that indeed it was the only thing that was certain to restore her from her black humours.”

“It seems rather unjust to place such a weight on your shoulders.”

“Every agreed that for the sake of the family reputation, Anne’s ruination and disgrace must be concealed at any cost.”

“Shocking.”

“Very much so,” Darcy agreed. “Of course, I never knew the truth in full until I reached the age of my majority and my father took me aside. He surprised me by demanding from me my word that I would not marry Anne. I was rather amazed by him, and it was then he told me the story including the fact that Anne now had a son living with his father near Tunbridge.”

“And when did your cousin learn her son was yet alive and well?”

“When she reached the age of her majority, she made a will,” said Darcy. “In the course of searching out potential de Bourgh



heirs, her solicitors discovered the truth of her son—Robert, he is called.”

“I cannot imagine how angry she must be about that deception.”

Darcy nodded. “Anne has always believed that if she can only hold out long enough, her mother will permit her to marry her boy’s father—or she will die, rendering her opinion irrelevant.”

He intended to say more, but he was unexpectedly distracted by a memory. Somewhere from within the recesses of his mind rose a recollection of himself, saying: Perhaps we should do as our elders have long wished, and marry. He tried to grasp hold of it—whether it was a memory, or perhaps it was not—but it would not be retrieved into his conscious mind.

Elizabeth was awaiting his further conversation however, and so he shook off his niggling remembrance, resolving to consider it further when he was alone. “I only wish for her to have a bit of happiness, as do I wish to have mine.”

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“Hopeless idiot!”

Mr Collins, hurrying down the walk toward his abode, felt the thump of a parasol that sent his hat flying, just as the words were said. In utter astonishment, he bent to retrieve it, settling it onto his head while keeping one eye fixed on the inexplicably infuriated countenance of Miss de Bourgh in front of him.

He raised both of his hands. “I know you are grieved, for surely such a jewel as yourself could only—”

“Grieved! I am not grieved!” The parasol was again waved about menacingly. “Everything was just as it should have been and now look what you have done!”

He licked his lips nervously. When he had received the letter from his dear wife’s father, he had made haste to go to Lady Catherine. Their plan was going awry, and he believed that his patroness would be able to act quickly and set things to rights.

He stepped toward Miss de Bourgh. “There is still time,” Mr

Collins said earnestly. "We can stop this wedding and then you can marry—" A grunt escaped him as Miss de Bourgh's parasol was brought down onto his head, once again knocking his hat into the lane.

"Idiot!" She hissed. "Do you not realise that marriage to Darcy is just what I wished to avoid!"

Mr Collins was confused. "If your mother does not act straightaway, Miss Elizabeth Bennet presented with such a match as she truly does not deserve, might leap upon the opportunity given her."

"I pray she does!"

His mouth fell open. "Do you not want to marry Mr Darcy?"

"No! Not at all!"

He furrowed his brow. "You want him to marry Cousin Eliza?"

"I do not care who he marries, so long as it is not me," she said angrily. Under her breath, she muttered, "As if I need yet another pompous iron-fisted fool to take away my enjoyments."

"But...but I had supposed you wished for him to marry you, just as your kind and beloved mother—"

"Then you supposed wrong," she spat at him coldly. "I want nothing more but for Fitzwilliam Darcy to be out of my life forever, and if Miss Elizabeth Bennet is inclined to take the charge, then I must say God bless her."

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On Friday, the day when she must give her answer, Elizabeth walked with her sisters into Meryton. Jane had a wish for their aunt's society and Lydia was seeking sweets from the confectioner. Elizabeth tried to attend their conversation, but her interest flagged rather quickly and soon she found herself well behind the other two.

The unexpected heat of the day had led to the near-desertion of the streets of Meryton. Elizabeth barely felt the sweat that dotted her brow, however, so consumed was she with contemplating both

Mr Darcy's proposal and her unanticipated positive feeling towards it—as well as her unanticipated positive feelings towards him. It astonished her that she had so recently disliked him.

It was remarkable how a man who made her laugh could so engage her, she thought. She would never have anticipated the light-hearted side of Mr Darcy, but she rather liked his good humour. She also found herself noticing, with uncomfortable frequency, how handsome he was. Even when pale, and in some pain, he looked handsome, she thought.

She wished she could, in better conscience, answer yes to his proposal. What stopped her was only her scruples; she had to admit, much as she knew he wished her to accept, she also felt that so doing would diminish her in his eyes. She would become a mercenary, willing to marry for money, and she despised the thought of that.

As she was occupied in her mind, she barely noticed Mr Wickham until he was upon her.

“Mr Wickham,” Elizabeth gave the stiffest, most unwelcoming curtsey she could manage and attempted to move past him. He would not allow it, stepping directly into her path.

“I need to speak with you,” he hissed. “Over here.” He gestured towards the corner of a nearby store.

With her face kept coolly polite she said, “I cannot think of anything you have to say that I would wish to hear.”

“In that you are entirely incorrect,” he said. “Now come. We need a bit of privacy.”

With a glance meant to be scathing, she turned her back on him, intending to walk away.

“Miss Elizabeth, please. It is in your interests to hear me.”

“You do nothing for the best interests of another,” she said, turning back towards him. “I am not so foolish as to think you would begin now.”

He gave her something of a wounded look. “We have been friends, have we not?”

“My friends do not commonly fill my head with lies,” she retorted. “I have no doubt that anything you wish to say to me now is but more of the same.”

Vexed, Mr Wickham spat, “Never mind then. If you wish to be a prejudiced fool, I shall not stand in your way. Pray, do not look to me when you are seventy and still sharing his bed.”

Now it was he who turned his back, looking as if he had every intention of stalking off. Against her better inclination, Elizabeth was roused to question him. "Very well then."

He slowly turned back and came to stand near her. In a lowered voice he said, "When Darcy returned to Meryton, he approached me. Naturally, I expected him to condemn me or berate me for something. He quite astonished me when he thanked me."

"Thanked you? For what?"

"For assisting him when he was unwell at Bromley," said Wickham. "My confusion arose because I was never in Bromley. It was not I who found him."

"No?" Elizabeth gave him a severe look. "Yet I have no doubt that you accepted the reward he offered quite readily."

"He gave me none, and I asked for nothing," said Wickham. "Most likely because I was so astonished by his assertions. Mr Darcy is very certain that on the tenth of April, he was quite drunk in a public house at Bromley and that I found and cared for him — and furthermore, this account has been substantiated by several persons, including his cousin."

"So you have received credit for some heroic act by Mr Darcy and his cousin and yet you disclaim all such efforts?"

"Colonel Fitzwilliam particularly would far rather attribute ill to me than good. I daresay the man would probably rather run me through than think me capable of kindness."

Did Mr Wickham truly imagine she might be sympathetic to such words? In any case, Elizabeth merely gave him a wry look before conjecturing, "Perhaps you have been confused with someone else."

"In any case, the matter intrigued me enough that I felt compelled to ask around a bit among those of a...certain circle."

"A certain circle?" Elizabeth raised her eyebrows, again quite doubtful. "I am sure that any such circles would have little knowledge of the goings-on of those of Mr Darcy's status."

"In that you are decidedly incorrect," Wickham informed her. "For I assure you, it is within the halls of the servants and tradespeople that gossip abounds and flourishes. But I have not yet told you what I learnt."

She waited.

"There is a man in the army, called Simmons," said Wickham, savouring the word army as one would a particularly delicious

morsel of food. "He has been flashing a bit of money around at the game tables recently—came into a small fortune rather unexpectedly, for a day's work."

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes, uncertain what it was that Wickham implied.

"He was asked to be a physician and wait upon a very important gentleman—despite the fact that he has no medical experience whatsoever."

"It is undoubtedly the wrong man."

"Perhaps it is," said Wickham. "However, the coincidences are striking. An exalted gentleman, to which has been ascribed a fatal illness."

He became pensive for a moment then, in a far-off voice, mused, "What I do not know is whether they would actually like to kill him or only wish to see him struggle in misery for a bit."

Elizabeth's mouth fell agape, and her mind raced with the implications of such a statement, but Wickham was ahead of her, leaping to the most astonishing conclusion of all. "In any case, it seems very possible—nay, very likely—that Mr Darcy does not have any fatal illness. Mr Darcy is as healthy as both you and I. There is a deception here but what is unclear is who is doing it and why."

After a moment of pause, he added, "Perhaps he is even putting up this farce himself."

"Mr Darcy is far too good to pass off such a deception and to what end?"

"To gain your hand in marriage."

It was a bit close to the truth; Elizabeth had wondered over it herself. However it could not be, not such a disguise, with such inherent risk. "If Mr Darcy were so desperate to marry, he could surely do so without stooping to such a scheme like this."

"I saw how he favoured you even in the autumn," said Wickham. "He might have felt to put forth this story as a means to justify doing what he wished to do, and avoid the censure of his family. They could surely not deny him his dying wishes, could they? And if he were miraculously healed later, they would be so glad, they would not worry over the fact that he had disappointed their matrimonial ambitions for him."

This much had not before occurred to Elizabeth. Was this Mr Darcy's peculiar escape from the strictures that bound him?

"Disguise of every sort is his abhorrence," she said, albeit

weakly. "What sort of marriage begins on a lie like this, in any case? He might win my hand, but he could never win my heart in such a way."

"True and we both know Darcy. He would never be content without total adoration," Wickham said wryly. "In any case surely he would not go so far as to poison himself, and I do believe he is being poisoned."

"Poisoned?" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"You might be surprised to learn that I was apprenticed to an apothecary for a time," Wickham told her. "I gave the notion of being a physician a great deal of thought."

"Indeed?"

Wickham nodded, casually adding, "Then I realised I despise sick people. Always so messy and extruding the foulest, most horribly smelling humours. I cannot abide a sickroom."

"Then dedicating your life to caring for them is surely out of the question." Elizabeth spoke with a bit of sarcasm that Wickham did not note.

"In any case, I did find an interest in poisons, and based on what I learnt of them, I believe I can say very confidently that Darcy is being given mercury."

"Many recipes contain mercury," Elizabeth protested. "It can be very useful in a number of disorders including..." She blushed, recalling a recent account she had read (clandestinely, in her father's study) of the most common usage of mercury.

From his looks, Mr Wickham knew what she meant, and laughed. "I assure you, Darcy does not have the French disease. He is far too fastidious for that."

Knowing her cheeks were very red, Elizabeth hurriedly continued speaking, "Let me see if I understand your theories, Mr Wickham. You believe Darcy was misled into thinking he had a fatal illness and given medicines which in truth are poisons designed to make him have symptoms of that illness."

"And perhaps eventually bring upon him the demise he believes is nigh."

That chilled her and she paused a moment. "But who would do such a thing? And why?"

"There are only ever two reasons," said Wickham. "Love and money."

"The tale began at Rosings so surely it cannot be money. As for

love?" Elizabeth began ticking off each name on her fingers. "There are Lady Catherine, Miss de Bourgh and Colonel Fitzwilliam: one who wished for him to marry Miss de Bourgh, one who wishes for him to marry anyone but Miss de Bourgh, and then the colonel."

"Fitzwilliam would not wish marriage to Anne upon Darcy." Wickham spoke very decidedly. "Unless of course he wished to save himself from the duty."

"Fitzwilliam would likely know his physician, as well as a military man who could impersonate the other doctor."

"If Fitzwilliam wished to induce him into matrimony, however, I would think he wields sufficient influence to do it without such schemes," said Wickham. "Moreover, the colonel, much as I loathe him, is a practical man. He does not spread his money about on useless things."

"So it is unlikely to be him," said Elizabeth. "Which leaves Lady Catherine or Miss de Bourgh, perhaps both of them acting together."

"The scheme is a bit risky. They assumed that when faced with death, he would marry. 'Tis not necessarily a valid assumption," said Wickham.

"Mr Darcy told me Miss de Bourgh did not wish to marry him," Elizabeth said, rather absently. "Said she was rather set against it, in fact."

"Then it would seem to me that Miss de Bourgh has the greatest stain of guilt in this matter."

"How so?"

"Because, no matter what Darcy does, only Miss de Bourgh is assured of a victory," said Wickham. "Firstly, she could hope that her family, not wanting to see her widowed, would relent in their efforts to induce her to marry him."

"And if they did not do that?"

"Then perhaps Darcy would act as he has, going to his one true attachment and marrying—again relieving Miss de Bourgh from the burden of him."

"But what if Darcy had agreed to marry her?"

"Easy," said Wickham. "Then she would probably kill him outright."

It seemed rather extraordinary to imagine Miss de Bourgh as a murderess and Elizabeth voiced this thought aloud.

Wickham shrugged. "Then she must have thought it a very good

notion that the other two alternatives would come to pass. Did she know of his attachment to you?"

"I do not know," said Elizabeth. A million scenarios played in her mind: had Miss de Bourgh seen Darcy writing his letter? Perhaps she had been there when he returned from the parsonage the evening prior? Did Hunsford have spies among the servants who told those at Rosings of what transpired within?

Wickham had continued to speak. "Miss de Bourgh has medications enough; it would be an easy matter to obtain what she needed to dose him. Perhaps she wanted to drive him directly into your arms; it would seem that it has been a great success in that regard.

Mr Wickham began to take his leave of her, stopping to add just one thing. "If it is mercury, when he stops taking it, the maladies he experiences will go away. It is worth a try, is it not?"



# Happy Hours

Elizabeth's thoughts were utter disorder as she walked home after her meeting with Mr Wickham. Try as she might, she could not discern what the truth of the matter was in this. However, she soon realised it mattered not.

The how and the why, the wherefores and what ifs were immaterial. All that mattered was the fact that there was a chance that she could marry Mr Darcy, and it would be a marriage to last a lifetime.

It was a notion that filled her with joy.

Having arrived home, she refreshed herself and then went to her mother's drawing room, where she enjoyed a bit of solitude while she awaited his arrival.

How did this happen? That is by far the greater mystery, how a once-ardent spite was turned to love in such a short time. She

thought of how they had laughed and talked over the past days, how he had proven gentlemanly and good and intelligent and kind—this man, this Darcy, was someone she could live with a very long time indeed and never tire of his company.

*But can I depend upon the new Darcy that I see? Supposing that it came out that Darcy would not die... will he then go back to being the man I knew last autumn? Or would the changes in his manners prove implacable?*

He was shown in by Hill, and she rose to greet him. Anxiety was plain on his countenance as it was, no doubt, on hers as well.

She invited him to join her on the small yellow settee. He perched upon it awkwardly, shifting about in an attempt to appear at ease. It brought to her mind that evening at Hunsford, how he had paced about before he spoke, and she turned her head, once again concealing her smile from him.

It made him laugh to catch her at it. “Miss Elizabeth, you must know that I know well how you tend to hide your amusement.”

“I am not amused,” she said, allowing her grin to break fully across her face. “I am only recalling the last time we spoke on this subject.”

“I am hoping for a far more favourable outcome this time.”

She reached towards him, laying her hand on his arm. “May I ask you one thing?”

“You may ask me anything and everything.”

She smiled at him gently. “If this had never happened to you, do you think we would have ever seen each other again?”

“Yes, most certainly,” he said.

She was surprised by his answer. “You do?”

“I surely do,” he told her. “I am not a man who loves easily and my attachments are exceedingly difficult to move, sometimes to my detriment.”

“As in the case of Mr Wickham.”

He inclined his head slightly. “Just so.”

“But I had insulted you so grievously, and abused your good name and your character—surely your pride would have revolted against any further acquaintance with me.”

“I assure you, I have not any pride remaining, and it is not due to the death sentence that is upon me.”

“Is it not?” Elizabeth spoke cautiously, leaning towards him. “I do admit I have feared that the new understanding between us

might falter, should your illness prove curable—which is naturally my deepest wish, above all.”

He shook his head. “This illness has changed nothing for me, save to impress upon me that which I already know—man’s time is short. Yes, had I not known this distemper upon me, I might have chafed and tossed about in my house in London, wishing for what I could not have until at last I realised that what you wanted was the same that I wanted to give you, the same that you ought to have. Then I might have hastened to you, desperate to show you the changes you wrought.”

“Me?” She reeled back a bit. “What have I done?”

He gently ran a finger along her cheek. “You have shown me what improper pride and conceit had done to me. For all my pretensions of a gentleman, I did not behave with honour, or with good character. I was all that I have despised in others, and I knew it not.”

She blushed, lowering her eyes. “I was too severe and should not have spoken as I did.”

“But I am so very glad you did,” he whispered. “I am thankful for the mirror you held up to me, to show me where I had gone awry. I am exceedingly grateful for the humbling I deserved that I might even now please you, a woman worthy of being pleased. No, my darling girl, I have changed for nothing or no one but you.”

Elizabeth looked up, meeting his eyes, his wonderful, warm eyes that showed her all he felt for her. *How does such a man love me?* She felt the same emotion she saw in his eyes welling up within her, threatening to make her sob. *How will I ever survive it if I lose him and his love?*

“What will you say to me, dearest Elizabeth?” he asked her. “Will you be my wife for whatever time is afforded me?”

“Yes,” she told him; then, she stopped speaking, seeing joy suffuse his face and render him such as she had never before seen him. “Yes, it will be my honour.”

He reached for her impulsively but stopped himself; she, sensing what he was about, encouraged him, meeting him halfway and tilting her face toward his in what she hoped was a charming manner.

Kissing him was like nothing she had ever imagined it could be. Her senses were awash in him, the taste, the scent, the feel of him beneath her fingers. She found herself unable to control her hands,

stroking his waistcoat, and running her thumbs along his jaw, even intertwining her fingers within his curls.

It was while she was so pleasurably engaged that she encountered something of a hard lump on the back of his head. When she touched it, he winced.

“What is this?” she asked him.

“I cannot say.” With a grimace, he added, “No doubt a remnant of my disgraceful night at Bromley. The sooner forgotten, the better.”

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The hours that followed were happy hours. Darcy applied to her father directly. Mr Bennet, feeling all the laziness of a summer's afternoon in his library, granted him Elizabeth's hand with very little trouble.

Mrs Bennet was in raptures, seeing her most vexatious daughter so advantageously settled. She immediately began to plan a wedding breakfast fit for the Prince Regent himself. She was vexed by their plan to marry by license within the next days, and in London no less.

However, before she could protest too loudly, Elizabeth whispered to her, “Mama, do you not think me clever for securing him as soon as may be?”

Mrs Bennet looked doubtful for a moment.

“After all,” Elizabeth added. “I am not nearly so pretty as Jane is, nor as lively as Lydia. I am only doing as I must to capture this extraordinary bit of good fortune when I can.”

“Oh,” Mrs Bennet considered that for a moment. “Yes, you are a quick one, my girl! But you could be very pretty, if only you would...”

And on she went, full of admonishments as to how Elizabeth's hair, clothing, jewels and the like should be—but at least she held silent on the timing of the wedding.

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It was some time later that they were afforded a private stroll in the gardens of Longbourn. With a shy but hopeful glance at her, Mr Darcy led her to a secluded corner. She presumed to think he would set about kissing her immediately but he did not.

Instead he settled onto the swing by the ancient maple that had been in Longbourn's yard before Longbourn was ever there, and pulled her gently onto his lap. There they sat, with Mr Darcy doing no more but staring at her.

At length, she laughed, and turned from him. "You and your stares!"

"I have made an error," he said.

This sobered her immediately. "You regret me already?" She tried to say it lightly but failed.

"Regret you? Oh no, not that!"

She had turned her face from him and he reached around, tucking his finger beneath her chin to gently steer her back to him. When she faced him, he kissed her gently and said, "I had not before considered that having such felicity will make it that much more difficult to leave."

His words struck her deeply with pain she had not realised she would feel. Such a strange, topsy-turvy courtship this was! From hate to love to despair all in a few days!

"Likewise I am seeing that...that it might be far more difficult for you than I ever anticipated." She gave him a small smile that strove for courage.

"Rich, young, beautiful," he teased—but it was tinged with sorrow. "You will turn London on its ear."

"I do not wish to turn London on its ear," she said. "But I do wish for something, from you."

"Anything," he said warmly. "There is nothing I would not give you."

She bit her lip a bit then realised she betrayed her anxiety. Her words were rushed when she spoke. "Stop taking the medicine."

“Stop taking it?”

She nodded.

He gave her an odd look. “I am told that if I do not take the remedies precisely as instructed, the symptoms will worsen. The head pain was quite excruciating and—”

“And was likely caused by the dreadful lump on the back of your head.”

This made him pause.

“I beg your trust in this matter. A week, no more — would that be acceptable? If after a week, you feel you need to take them again, by my leave, do so.”

His eyes were searching, and slowly he asked, “Why do you ask this of me?”

“I cannot tell you yet.” She paused then added, in a lighter tone, “I assure you, I am not seeking to hasten your demise.”

He studied her a moment, then said, “Very well then. I shall not take them.”

# Understanding

Mr Darcy set out for London the day after their understanding was settled between them. He had matters to attend to, such things as settlements and informing his house staff that they would be gaining a mistress. They had decided that Elizabeth, Jane and Mr and Mrs Bennet would follow on Monday. He had visited Longbourn before he left to bid Elizabeth his farewell before departing, and she watched him go with an unanticipated lump in her throat.

“Lizzy, I believe you are sad,” Jane said.

“Sad? Of course not,” Elizabeth replied. “I will see him in only two days.” Her words might have been more persuasive had they not been delivered around the lump in her throat.

*Eight and forty hours, she told herself as she wandered about in the garden later. Of those, I must sleep about sixteen and then there are*

*meals and church... a small party at Purvis Lodge, that will keep me occupied.*

She had much to do of her own interests, packing and trimming a gown that she hoped would suit for her wedding. Lydia had proven oddly helpful in the latter, doing up a bonnet with new ribbons and lace in a manner that even Miss Bingley would have found it difficult to disparage.

Nonetheless, she had a great deal of time to spend with her thoughts. Those thoughts were divided into only two subjects: the extraordinary turn of events in which she found herself very nearly in love with Mr Darcy; and, what she thought was true regarding his "illness."

He had ceased taking his medication on Friday, and she believed she saw some improvement in his colour already on Saturday. Perhaps it was no more than wishful thinking? But he had also reported that a ringing in his ears had ceased.

"I had not realised it was there until it left me," he told her. "But it is undoubtedly so."

She had nearly told him then, wishing to unburden herself concerning what Mr Wickham had told her. However, the idea of that gave her pause. Did she want him to think she still heard Mr Wickham's lies? Did she even wish him to know that she still recognised Mr Wickham as an acquaintance? Furthermore, she feared that if he knew that Mr Wickham was involved in the matter, he would insist on continuing his medicine that she believed, with increasing surety, was poisonous to him.

So she did not tell him. Instead she had moved to tell him that her feelings had changed for him, changed rather materially. Before she continued too far, however, he had stopped her.

"I need you to promise me something." He gave her a half-smile. "It might seem contrary to my truest wishes but something that is necessary."

"Of course," she said kindly.

"Never, ever tell me you...love me," he said, swallowing hard as he said the word love.

She had not fully understood him at first. "I would never say I loved you unless I truly did."

"If the day comes when I have your love" he said, "I do not want to know about it. For as difficult as it shall be to know I must leave you as we are, to know I have your love would make it an



impossibility. I truly do not think I could bear the sorrow of leaving both you and your love—leaving you alone is hard enough.”

He took her hands in his. “Promise me that you will never say more than that you are content with your decision to marry me.”

Her breath caught with the pain in his request, both then and yet now in the remembrance of it. She had given him her word, knowing even then it might be difficult to honour it.

Made all the more difficult, she could admit now, by the fact that she did, she did love him.

“When did this happen?” She said it with half amusement and half lamentation. This man, who she had despised so heartily—had she ever honestly disliked him? Or had her dislike of him been meant to save herself from liking him? It mattered little now, of course; he loved her, and she loved him, even if she could not tell him so. It was both freeing and painful to know it.

As she could not pledge her love to him, she instead made another vow, this one to herself: that whosoever had done this to him, whoever had made him feel the burden of his mortality, would never be any friend of hers. “And I will know,” she told the gowns in her trunk with determination. “I will find out who is responsible if I breathe my last doing it.”

For now, she decided she would write him a letter. It would be one that would explain her suspicions to him, and one that would affirm—should he ever be well enough to wonder—that she had married him with love in her heart and every reason to hope for a long life with him.

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From the moment Darcy stepped out of his carriage, he was busy in London. He visited his solicitor, arranging matters of his will and the marriage articles before he had even taken time to remove the dust from his clothes after his journey. His intention, after that, was to go to his family but before he could meet them, he found Bingley. Bingley immediately prevailed upon him to go to their club

together and sit for a drink; though reluctant, Darcy eventually agreed.

There was much to be discussed between the two friends. Darcy enquired after his friend's business with his aunt's death and Bingley told him he had left a much-aggrieved Caroline behind him to settle with her servants and close the house.

"After all," Bingley said with a smile that masked whatever else he might feel. "Caroline has shown me that she is very good, nay excellent, at closing up a house with little to no warning. I thought it an ideal opportunity for her to practise her art. Hurst will bring her back to town, although it might be some weeks until he can manage it. Country life suits him very well.

"But enough of that. Let me hear how you are feeling." Bingley leant toward him, concern marking his features.

"I cannot say that this medicine Simmons has me taking do much good. I intend to visit him soon as may be to discuss it with him."

"A fine idea," Bingley said. Then with a bit of a sheepish look, he admitted, "I hope you will not think it impertinent, but I visited Mr Simmons. He told me he would be honoured to see you, and I think you should do that as soon as you can. Get his opinion on the matter, perhaps there is something he can do for you."

"What do you mean?" Darcy looked at his friend in some confusion. "He has seen me, was there was I awoke. It is he who gave me the remedies."

Bingley shook his head slowly. "No, he was very definite on the matter. He said he had never seen you."

There was a brief silence while Darcy pondered that. Bingley, unable to endure much contemplation at last spoke again. "Bit of an odd fellow, is he not? I believe I must say that strange diet of his makes for an unusual constitution. I think he looks far older than middle age."

"Old? I thought him quite a young man."

"He is fifty if he is a day."

"Are you certain you met the right man?"

"Simmons," Bingley confirmed. "Said he knew Dunwoody and that Dunwoody had recommended him to the case, but that he had not, as yet, had the privilege to make your acquaintance."

Darcy stared at him a long moment, at last saying, "Do you think you might go with me to call on him now?"

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It was Lady Catherine's intention to set out immediately for Hertfordshire when she learnt of Eliza Bennet's treachery. However, quite precipitously and unexpectedly, she found herself in the grip of a bout of dysentery that prevented her from stirring too far from her bedchamber for several days.

Needless to say, her indisposition caused a great deal of work for her maids and the laundress and thus it was that she was prevented from setting out for Hertfordshire until the following Tuesday. In the end, it proved fortuitous, for she learnt from Mr Collins that the wedding would not take place in Hertfordshire at all, but in London.

"A license for such a marriage as that," she growled at Mr Collins. "...is like feeding pheasant to the hogs. In any case, London suits me very well. My journey is shortened, and I may remain the night with my brother."

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Colonel Forster required his men to attend church, and so there was Wickham, in the back row on Sunday, settling in for what promise to be a nap. Elizabeth cast several looks at him throughout the service but stopped when she noticed Lady Lucas watching her. The last thing she needed was gossip being spread that she was casting longing stares at Mr Wickham.

In any case, her interest in Mr Wickham did pertain to romance, but it was her romance with Darcy. With steely determination and a contrived and uninviting countenance, she made her way to his side after the service had been concluded.

In a whisper barely audible to even him, she said, "Stream by northernmost edge of Longbourn, two hours."

He nodded to show he understood.

She was there fifteen minutes before the appointed time, having made a narrow escape from Mrs Bennet and Longbourn. She paced while she awaited him, and it seemed an eternity until she saw him walking toward her.

He was looking about him anxiously, so she said, "It is the woods Mr Wickham. I am certain of our seclusion."

"I would not like Darcy to see us," he admitted. "Now that you are promised to him, I assure you, he will protect you with a ferocity."

"Never mind that," she said. "Here." She held to him a purse containing what funds she had put aside from her allowance.

Mr Wickham looked as if she had extended a live snake towards him. He peered at it. "What is that?"

She pushed it into his hands. "When do you next have leave?"

"Ah... I... this is a decent bit of money." He had opened it and stared inside at it wonderingly. "What do you... why are you giving this—"

"You did not get it from me, nor did we have this conversation. Take this, go to London and find this Simmons person. Pay him off, get him drunk, gamble for it... you will know how it is done better than I. Just do it."

"I do not know if I can—"

She was suddenly fierce. "Do you not think you owe him something? Something for all the misery you have given to him?"

Mr Wickham allowed his hand, and the purse within it, to drop to his side. "You are prevailing upon me to be of much finer character than I truly am."

"We both know you are adept at disguise and lies, so I am certain you can manage it."

"Why should I help him?" Mr Wickham was suddenly petulant. "He has everything he could ever desire, and even in misfortune, I am to aid him in gaining the love of a worthy woman?"

"Thank you for the compliment, though it was delivered in a somewhat backward manner," Elizabeth replied. "In any case, he already has my love. I am merely asking you to help me right a wrong. Surely there is enough decency in you for that much."

Mr Wickham sighed and looked into the purse once again. "Very

tedious, this business of being a decent fellow.”

“This is all I will ask,” said Elizabeth. “You may return to being the dastardly blackguard when you finish it, and I will not interfere, save for one thing.”

“What is that?”

“Stay away from my sisters,” she said as she turned to go. “And I shall take the liberty of including Miss Darcy in their number.”

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A Sunday evening, thought Darcy while pacing about his library in London. *Nothing to do and I am surely an awful object.*

He had not been able to meet Mr Simmons. The physician was not there when Darcy called with Bingley, so he left his card along with a request that Mr Simmons might wait on him at his earliest convenience. The disparity in what Bingley knew and what he believed hinted at some mischief afoot and it was tempting, very tempting, to imagine error and mischance resulting in a better fate.

Unlikely, he reminded himself. No matter what is or what might be, you have this nonsense about the symmetry.

Save for the fact that he was not certain he really saw it anymore, not so much more than he had ever been. Surely everyone had one eyebrow bushier than the other, one hand a bit larger, a cleft in the chin that went a bit to one side... did they not?

He had seen his Fitzwilliam relations earlier that day. Though they had expressed some misgivings about his choice of a wife, he was quick to tell them he wished for happiness in these, his last days. He quelled their entreaties for Anne straightaway by saying he would not like a rift in the family to mar this time; they had agreed, although in a fashion he had believed meant they had not yet ceded to him.

His musings were interrupted by his cousin shortly before the time at which he would dine. Fitzwilliam appeared ill at ease, and Darcy was immediately put on his guard by his grave countenance.

After some brief discourse on the usual subjects, Darcy said, “I

can scarcely abide your fractious gloom. Why do you not unburden yourself ?”

“I must confess something to you.” It was said bluntly and without preamble. Warily, Darcy replied, “Confess then.”

“It is about Rosings.”

Darcy said nothing, his gaze unwavering. He had resolved himself to something out of the common way, but nothing he could have imagined would have prepared him for what Fitzwilliam said.

“Quite by accident, of course, I came upon you when... just as Anne refused you.”

“What? Refused me! Anne?”

“Yes, she refused you, rather eloquently, in fact.” Fitzwilliam sighed. “It was why I was unsurprised that you failed to appear the rest of the day, though I know not what happened between Anne’s refusal of you and getting word from you at Bromley.”

“I did not make Anne an offer of marriage. That could not be.”

“You did,” Fitzwilliam insisted. “I came to you just as you said to her ‘why should not we marry, Anne? It will gratify all the wishes of our family’.”

“I could not have... never would I...” Darcy found himself stumbling about in dismay.

Fitzwilliam shrugged. “So you have fallen in love with Anne after so many years. I see no harm in it.”

Darcy laughed, throwing back his head and nurturing his mirth. “Can you really think I fell in love with Anne?”

“It did seem odd,” Fitzwilliam agreed. “But after so many years, to propose to her now? I could not think why you had done so otherwise. I presumed to imagine that you were heartbroken and decided you could not remain at Rosings a minute more and left, intending to make London before nightfall.”

Darcy sighed, rubbing his hand over his face. “Would that I could remember anything after meeting Elizabeth in the grove!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I am not in love with Anne,” Darcy said resolutely. “But I am very much in love with my betrothed.”

He continued his tale, telling Fitzwilliam all he knew, and all he had been given to know—as well as all that he was learning now was not necessarily the truth.

By the time he was finished, Fitzwilliam was sitting in an attitude of deep contemplation. Darcy was heartened to see it.

“When last you saw me, how did I look?” Darcy asked. “Was I then ill? What I cannot determine is when this supposed illness set upon me.”

“The last I saw you was at dinner the night before,” Fitzwilliam replied. “You looked then as you always do at Rosings: like a man enduring a grievous trial. I did not see you with Anne, I only heard you, stopping myself before you saw me. I did not wish to embarrass either of you, so I retreated. The next I saw you was at Bromley.”

“And how did I look there?”

“Like a man who was very, very drunk,” Fitzwilliam laughed. “I had truly never seen you in such a state. You could scarcely walk out under your power. Which is why I was shocked you had so little to drink.”

“So you then brought me to London and then...?”

“And then Simmons arrived,” said Fitzwilliam. “And make us all aware that he alone would manage your care.”

“Simmons,” said Darcy with a sigh of disgust. “Who might not be a physician at all.”

“He had the correct letter from Dunwoody and he seemed all he should be.”

“His credentials were good; I saw them myself.” Darcy had risen, and he paced as he thought of it all. “Who called him?”

“Who called him?” Fitzwilliam considered that a minute. “Fields, maybe? I cannot say.”

Both men were silent a second, thinking about it. Darcy at last spoke saying, “It all seems a bit contrived, does it not? When you pick it apart, bit by bit, the story begins to fall apart.”

“That is true,” Fitzwilliam agreed. “But let me ask you this: what does it mean to you?”

“It means that perhaps I am not so sick, after all. Perhaps this is some scheme or even a cruel joke, designed to make me miserable.”

“Perpetrated by whom? And to what end?”

“I hardly know.”

# An Optimism He Had Rarely Known

Darcy thought it rather unseemly, his haste to see his betrothed. It seemed that they had been separated a month at least. Despite his best effort to restrain himself, he was at Gracechurch Street just as the carriage bearing her and her parents and sister arrived.

Miss Jane Bennet blushed and turned pink at the sight of him while Mr Bennet made some wry remark about the eagerness of a lover. It was, surprisingly, Mrs Bennet who urged them both to decorum, hastening them inside while leaning into the carriage to offer some hissing remark to Elizabeth. Whatever she said, Elizabeth remained attractively red with the blush of it when she emerged from the carriage.

He reached out his hand to help her down, his eyes on hers. She had a faint smile on her lips, and it required every bit of restraint to refrain from kissing them. "I missed you," he whispered, taking the



liberty of caressing the hand within his own.

“Our last parting,” she said quietly, making no move to remove from his touch.

“Oh yes, to be sure. You must attend me everywhere.”

“I do not think I can let you out of my sight,” she agreed with a smile.

“What about when I wish to shoot?”

“I will hold the bag,” she promised with a gentle squeeze of his fingers. “What about when I would like to sew?”

He used their clasp to pull her to him a bit. “I will gather the thread for you. Shall I read to you in the evenings?”

“Yes indeed, and when you tire I will play and sing to you.”

There was a sound like a loud clearing of the throat. Both Elizabeth and Darcy startled, looking at the house that had been quite forgotten in their love-making.

Mr Gardiner stood in his doorway. “Lizzy, I presume that is your young man there? Will you join us in the house? I fear if this goes on much longer, the neighbours will become scandalised. They are a missish bunch.”

Elizabeth laughed and cast Darcy a sideways look. “Shall you be introduced to my aunt and uncle?”

It was a more significant question than it seemed, and he knew it. With as much reassurance as he could imbue into the words, he looked at Mr Gardiner and said, “It will be my very great honour.”

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It took rather little for Wickham to gain what he sought. Simmons fancied himself an actor and enjoyed his audience very well.

“A clergyman!” he bellowed. “Thought he was quite the gentleman, overgrown ox that he was!”

“Yes,” said Wickham, neatly arranging his cards. “I know the man well.”

“Paid me a handsome sum to do the job.”

“One hundred pounds altogether,” said Wickham. “So you have

said.”

“That is aright!” The man boasted drunkenly, nearly falling off his seat.

Wickham’s nose wrinkled with distaste. “And how much of that has been poured down your throat?” he muttered, the notion dawning on him, as it had not before, that drunk people were rarely wise. Then and there he resolved that he would yet drink, and he would yet enjoy the game table, but never again would he do both at once. *Never let it be said that I cannot improve with age.*

“But the man’s name,” he insisted to his drunken friend, just as the man looked as though he might heave all over the floor. “What was his name?”

“Collins,” belched Simmons. “Worked for a fine lady too, Miss Anne Debber... Debber? No, that was not the way of it. Darber? Barder?”

Wickham sighed. “Miss Anne de Bourgh, of Rosings Park.”

“Heiress of Rosings Park,” Simmons crowed loudly. “Yes indeedy! Say there! Can you think it, he said the fireplace there—”

“Yes, I know,” Wickham said sharply. Having divested Simmons of a good sum along with the information he sought, he decided to take his leave. Such establishments as this were rather beneath him in any case.

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Darcy woke on the morning he was to marry Elizabeth filled with an optimism such as he had rarely known.

The day prior had been nothing short of delightful. The Gardiners were a charming couple, and he had decided he had no reservation in knowing them, despite the manner in which Mr Gardiner earned his living. It was clear that Elizabeth and Miss Bennet had both gotten a great deal of their manners from Mrs Gardiner who was more well-bred than most of the ‘fine’ ladies he had ever known.

Although he was loath to accept, they insisted on keeping him to

dinner. He hated to interrupt what was likely the last of their family parties, but Mr Gardiner had pressed him. "Are we not all soon to be family?"

Darcy found he rather liked the idea. Mostly, however, he simply wished to be with Elizabeth. Having at last earned an understanding with her, he already felt joined to her; being without her felt like he was missing a part of himself. He had tried to explain it to her, knowing well how poorly he expressed himself and that she did not share his feelings for her.

"It was as if a bit of me was left elsewhere, a sort of incomplete... well, I cannot say it exactly but it was... A hollowed-out feeling..."

She had watched him as he stumbled about, stupid and helpless in his attempt to describe his emotion and when she could, when the eyes of the room were turned elsewhere, she leant into him. Quick as a wink, she kissed his cheek then just as quickly pulled back, whispering, "I missed you too. I found myself rather ridiculously lovelorn."

He bit his lip to keep from shouting in exultation or doing something equally foolish. Nonetheless, he was certain the broad, silly grin he wore the rest of the evening told the truth of it quite well. He was quite shackled to her, heart, mind and soul, and now they wanted only for the Church of England to give their nod to it.

It was as he dressed the next morning that less pleasant matters intruded. "You have a caller, sir. Insisted on seeing you at once."

"Who would call at such an hour on a man's wedding day?"

Silently, his man handed him a card. Curiosity overcame outrage at the effrontery. "Very well. I will see him shortly."

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Elizabeth had woken with the dawn, her thoughts and dreams too full of restless, excited musings to get much rest. Today she would be Mrs Darcy. It was an astonishing thought.

She had rather hoped that Mr Wickham would come to her, and

confirm what she had believed to be true but he had not. Thus did she remain as she was before, filled with suspicions but very little in the way of the hard truth.

Should she have told him?

It makes no difference to this day, she told herself. He has proposed to me twice; once at Rosings and once in Hertfordshire. I daresay I may suppose that his heart, along with his honour, are fully engaged. He would wish to marry me nonetheless.

She took up the letter she had written him, which had been set by her trunks. They were ready to be sent to Darcy's house as soon as she no longer had need of them here. She intended to give the letter to the servant, instructing him that it should not be read by Darcy until she gave him leave to do so.

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When Wickham had finished his amazing tale, the two men sat for a moment. Darcy's mind raced so violently, he scarce knew what to make of anything he knew. In one thing, however, he decided he must be certain.

"Why have you taken it on yourself to learn these things for me?" he asked. "It could not have been mere curiosity that compelled you."

"It was not."

"Then what? Surely not the goodness of your heart."

Wickham was master of himself enough to throw back his head and laugh heartily. Then, with an expression of regret, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a small purse. He handed it to Darcy.

It contained a trifling sum, but he counted it and then looked to Wickham for clarification.

Wickham did not offer any. Instead he rose, saying, "Give it to Miss Elizabeth ... or rather Mrs Darcy. Tell her not to fear I have become an improved man for I did keep my winnings. Used them to purchase a new commission."

"New commission?"

“Apprenticed to an army doctor,” Wickham explained. “I have recently felt a calling towards the sick of the battlefield.”

“The sick of the battlefield?” Darcy asked. “Or the prostitutes who visit them?”

Wickham laughed but did not directly answer. “Naturally such an endeavour requires funding, not for the commission itself but then there is the expense of travel, a new coat, some books and—”

Darcy stopped him, holding up his hand and rolling his eyes before handing him twenty pounds and fixing him with a haughty stare that prevented him from asking for more.

On Wickham's way out, he came across Georgiana in the entry way. She blushed and nearly dropped the bonnet that was in her hand, then almost froze in the terror of seeing him.

Very awkwardly but fully mindful of his promise to keep from her sisters, Wickham inclined his head a fraction of an inch then scurried out the door.

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When the door had at last closed behind Wickham, Darcy was lost in thought. From what he had related to Fitzwilliam through unto the intelligence that George had just given him, he thought it was fair to believe that some nonsense was afoot.

He considered what he knew to be true: he had considered offering for Anne; he had somehow been injured; he had by some means been conveyed to Bromley and left there; and, Anne and Mr Collins had paid an army man to tell him he was dying. Moreover, Wickham believed that he had been taking mercury, and it was this, more so than some mysterious ailment of the brain, which had caused him to feel so ill.

Had he acted as they wanted? Or was he, in marrying Miss Elizabeth Bennet, thwarting their scheme? He could scarcely imagine their motive, nor was he certain Lady Catherine was not involved in the matter. Of course, if she were, then he would suppose he might have awakened with Anne in his bed, not with a

death sentence upon him.

And now this matter of his marriage to Elizabeth Bennet due to occur in—he checked his watch—just above an hour.

Theirs was a conditional arrangement, with her agreement based on his impending demise, but what if no demise was impending?

Her feelings have changed, said the optimistic lover within him.

You asked her to care for you, he reminded himself. It was part of the arrangement. She is doing no more than holding to her part of the scheme. Her natural disgust of you remains, and once she knows that you are well, she will be enraged, perhaps even feel a bit deceived.

His breakfast had been brought to him but he could not touch it.

*Will she believe I was as much a victim as she?* he thought uneasily. *Or will she think me a party to the scheme?* What if their hopes of marital felicity were over before they had even begun?

But there was no choice, was there? He was pledged, irrevocably promised to her, and she to him. It was the day they would marry.

Was he selfish to keep what he knew to himself? Was this yet another example of his high handedness?

And why had Wickham given him money to give Elizabeth?

There was a knock at the door to his study. It was Fields, looking rather cheerful.

“Sir, Miss Bennet’s trunks have arrived and the maids are setting her things about for her.”

“Good.”

“Along with the trunks came this.” Fields extended a hand with a letter. Darcy did not know Elizabeth’s writing but a look at the small, neat script with its unexpected flourishes persuaded him as to the identity of the author. It made him smile to think she had written to him.

He moved to take his opener that he might read her words to him as soon as he could, but Fields stopped him. “She asked that you would not, sir.”

“That I did not read it?”

“No.”

“Why would she send a letter that she did not wish me to read?”

“She said that if it were ever required, she would ask you to read it, so that you would know what she was thinking of this morning.”

“I would like to know what she is thinking right now,” said

Darcy.

Fields bowed a bit, saying, "I think she would rather you did not."

# The Wedding

Mr Collins licked his lips nervously, looking quickly to where his generous benefactor slept in her carriage, seemingly insensible to the disaster in which they all were embroiled. Miss de Bourgh had her eyes closed also; how could she manage sleep at such a time as this?

He regretted heartily the sausages he had eaten for breakfast for they seemed to have amassed in his gut, a heavy weight of guilt and worry and fear. How he despised what this business had done to him! He had always tried to live his life in a correct and upright manner and he believed that he had arrived at his present station thanks to those good scruples. Now, for the sake of having arrived at Rosings Park a few minutes too early on the morning of the tenth of April, he was a principal character in such a tawdry mess as he could never have imagined.



He felt moisture pooling in his underarms and groin and shifted uneasily in the seat.

He had tried to warn Mr Bennet that he should not give his blessing to such a union as that of his Cousin Eliza and Mr Darcy—warned him most strenuously of the evils of such a marriage, not the least of which included the displeasure of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Mr Bennet had proven rather indifferent to his warning and had not afforded him the respect that, as a clergyman, Mr Collins felt he was due. He had replied, in a somewhat impertinent manner: ‘Console Lady Catherine as well as you can. But, if I were you, I would stand by the nephew. He has more to give.’

As if only money were to account for his loyalty to his estimable patroness!

And yet... one must not discount the prudent considerations. Mr Darcy did indeed have his own appointments to make and should his tenancy of Hunsford cottage become insufferable due to this... this perversion of all which was good and proper, well then...

He cast another nervous glance at the two ladies in the carriage with him. They did not stir, either of them, insensible to his traitorous musings.

A bead of sweat rolled down his cheek, and he dabbed at it with his handkerchief.

Mr Darcy, he was certain, had been impressed with his station and demeanour at his friend’s ball, when they had been acquainted. He was certain the good gentleman bore no ill will towards him for neglecting to introduce himself sooner, and he believed he was not mistaken that they had formed something of a friendship in Mr Darcy’s time at Rosings. Heaven only knew the man came by his house often enough; he must have been pleased by the society of himself and his dear Charlotte. What else could bring him so frequently?

So then;, if Lady Catherine were able to thwart these mislaid plans and stop the wedding of Cousin Eliza and Mr Darcy then all would be well. If not, however...

He glanced again and further lip-licking ensued after that.

If not, then he would need to do as he must to show Mr Darcy that he had been of great service to him and would continue to be so, come what may.

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Darcy's conscience, it would seem, would afford him no rest.

*Tell her*, one part of his mind urged him. She has a right to know before this last, most irreversible step is taken.

*I cannot*, the other part answered. *Not when I do love her so very much and do believe we will be happy together. Not when I am already honour-bound to her, not when I...*

*Many instances of the word 'I' in there*, he thought, running his hands through his hair in desperation.

Nothing was certain, was it? And yet—how could he wish to be dying? How could he hope that the disease upon him was true?

He looked again at his watch. The carriage bearing the party from Gracechurch Street was due at any minute. A plan, he needed a plan, something... some way out of this muddle.

*Tell her*, his mind urged. He swallowed hard.

She did not love him, could not. She had despised him so heartily only weeks before this; his greatest wish was that she found his society tolerable. That was the most to which he could aspire, and yet if she knew that today would condemn her to years with him...no, no, she would surely call it off. Who knew about it, save for his family—who would be glad to forget it ever happened—and hers? The damage to her reputation would be minimal and of course he would do all he could...

He nearly choked on his regret. Damnation! He wanted to marry her, wanted it so very badly, and to see that he must at least offer her freedom now required a better man than he knew if he could be.

He could not, he simply could not... and yet he must.

He tossed himself into a chair, allowing a deep groan to tear itself from his throat. Burying his head in his hands, he moaned aloud. "Dear lord but I want nothing more than to marry Elizabeth Bennet."

"How very fortunate then, that we find ourselves in both possession of the needed license and the vicar."

Darcy was so shocked to hear her voice that astonishment bore him to his feet. "Elizabeth!"

She smiled at him and for a moment, he could do no more than stare at her, revelling in her loveliness. Her gown was palest blue, and he thought that never could any other colour be so perfect for her. She walked toward him, the small smile on her lips turning into a slight frown of concern.

"Are you well? You sounded unwell when I entered, and you are very pale."

"I am as well as can be expected," he answered, and then sighed. Seeing her made him realise all the more what he must do. He might hate it, he might chafe against it but never could he take what did not belong to him. "I am glad you are here. I need to speak with you."

"And I with you," she said. "But are you certain you are well enough? We need not marry today if your head aches—"

"No, no," he said. "My head... do not worry about my head."

The bustle of wedding preparations had begun. They had settled on the finest sitting room for their nuptials. As it was near to his study, he could hear everything, people gathering, the servants scurrying about and the incongruously high voice of the vicar who was quite a large man. He could not bear to hear the gaiety in all of their voices. Even the steps of the servants seemed lightened today.

"May we go somewhere?" He turned to her in desperation. "Somewhere more... quiet?"

"Of course." She still had that worried look about her but she went as directed, going in front of him towards a back hall. Her hair was done in a way he especially liked, he noticed with internal despair. Gathered with braids underneath but curls left loose to brush her neck. Against his better judgment, he reached towards her, allowing the curls to bounce onto his fingers. The feeling of his fingertips on her neck caused Elizabeth to turn her head, and look back at him. She smiled but was clearly confused by his manner.

They had come to the end of the little hall where a door led to the outside. It was the servants and tradesman's entrance, and he knew they would not be disturbed there. The steps were made of stone and overlooked the mews.

He took his handkerchief and spread it on the steps, and Elizabeth sat. He sat next to her, allowing his shoulder and arm to press against hers.

*This is it, he told himself. Say it. Just get it out.*

“Forgive me, but perhaps you will allow me to tell you—”

“No,” he interrupted her. “No, I... may I? Excuse me, I only need... pray, let me continue.”

She was looking at him, but he could not look at her. He fixed his eyes upon his shoes.

The words came tumbling out of him, rambling and incoherent and scarcely making any sense at all. Then again, the whole of the business scarcely made sense, not just his recitation of it. He told her all he knew, including the fact that now, just over four days since taking his remedies, he was feeling far better than ever he might have imagined possible. He ended by telling her of his strange and unexpected visit from George Wickham and what that man had to say to him.

“So it would seem,” he said, “that I am not to die. I am a man of eight and twenty expected to have as much life ahead of me as any other of my age. You have agreed to marry me under a condition that no longer exists.”

She did not reply. He hazarded a quick glance in her direction and noted that she appeared troubled. *Likely considering how to make this breach easy for us both*, he thought.

Darcy felt an odd compulsion to continue speaking and cast about for something more to say, something which would occupy his lips and tongue which were inclined toward prostrate begging at this point. He recalled the purse of her money and withdrew it from his pocket.

“Why did you give money to George Wickham anyway?” he asked, handing her the little purse and then resuming his study of his shoes. “He has returned it, said not to worry, he kept his winnings.”

She did not reply immediately. She took the purse from his hands, studying it, playing with the little button that kept it closed.

He supposed it was of no consequence. What did it matter what little friendship, what business went on between Elizabeth and George Wickham? She was not his, no matter what her name was or would be; her heart did not belong to him and—

In a soft voice, she began to speak. “I wanted to know who could have done such an awful and decidedly cruel trick to you. Had I learnt of it before you, I have no doubt that I should have shown them precisely how savage the populace of Hertfordshire

may, at times, be.”

He looked at her then, somewhat comprehending but unsure. She turned her eyes toward him, her luminous brown eyes now filled with emotion he dared not name and whispered, “I knew.”

He reached out and touched her cheek. “But... but...” he stammered, having no idea what to say, afraid to believe might come to pass.

“Have you read my letter Fitzwilliam?” she asked in that same, beguiling soft tone. Following the shake of his head, she said, “Pray, do so now.”

Nodding mutely, he withdrew it from his pocket and began to read.

*Dearest Fitzwilliam,*

*It is our wedding day today, and before we marry there is something I must tell you.*

*If you are reading this, I suspect you have recently learnt that you do not have some disease, some fatal illness. I know not who has perpetrated such a cruel jest on you though I do have some suspicion. It does not signify in any case.*

*Before I gave you my answer to your second proposal on this Friday last, I was approached by Mr Wickham on the street. Though I have long since learnt my lesson in trusting anything that man chooses to say, in this case, he entreated me to consider the tale he had to relate, assuring me he had no ill intention.*

*Mr Wickham, you see, was well aware that he was not in Bromley in April, and nor was he your Good Samaritan, the one who saved you from your supposed drunkenness. The fact that both you and Colonel Fitzwilliam claimed he was, however, roused his curiosity; he made some inquiries, quickly learning that the Mr Simmons you met was an army man, not a physician, and that he had been paid a rather handsome sum to make his diagnosis. Mr Wickham concluded, and I agreed, that it was very likely this was all a hoax.*

*This left me with the decision of whether I would marry you, knowing that I might well have a lifetime to be with you.*

*I surprised even myself with the exceedingly great joy I felt at the idea of a lifetime spent with you. How astonishing it was to realise that a life without you would be too desolate to bear!*

*I shall pledge my troth to you with vows of love and honour that are completely true. They are not made with any consideration of fortunes*

*or widowhood or any such morbid thought; but only the desire I have to be known as wife to the man I have come to realise is the very best man of my acquaintance. I am yours, for now and for always.*

*Without reserve, I will also add: I love you.*

*Let us happily grow old together, my beloved.*

*For the next to last time, I will sign,*

*Elizabeth R. Bennet*

What he felt on reading her words, he could not even name, only that it nearly overcame him. He breathed her name and closed his eyes, leaning toward her and laying his head on hers. Her arm slipped around his side, under his coat, and she too leant into him, her cheek resting on his shoulder.

But he had to be sure. "So you knew before you accepted me?"

"I did not know with certainty, but I did think it more likely than not."

"And you wish to marry me nonetheless?"

She laughed lightly and said, "My wish to marry you only grew more urgent, and my attachment to you stronger."

He pulled back a moment to look at her. "And you paid George Wickham to find out who did it to me?"

"Yes, I did." For a moment, she was a bit sheepish looking. "Who better to get to the bottom of such a vile scheme than one who is versed in such doings? An honourable man would not even know where to look."

He threw back his head and laughed.

"Do you still wish to marry me?" she asked, a bit teasingly. "Now that you know I am capable of such doings, perhaps it has turned your interests."

He shook his head at her. "I believe you are seeking a compliment, Miss Bennet, and I will give you one gladly. There is not a day that has gone by since last autumn that you have not held my heart in your hands and today, I love you more so than ever. You are my everything, and I would not give you up for anything."

She blushed, looking away from him. "Then I believe we should go get married," she said.

"Yes, I think we should get to it," he said. He could not allow her shyness to stand however, and reached for her, gently turning her head and giving her a light kiss. It made her blush more which brought him great pleasure.

He rose then, taking her hand and helping her to rise along with him. They moved to go back in the servants' entrance.

The door opened just as Darcy reached for it, to reveal Georgiana, pale and trembling, her hands twisting together in front of her. "I hoped I would find you here. Our aunt has arrived," she told him. "With Anne and Mr Collins alongside her."

Darcy stopped for a moment, thinking of what poor timing he had. Elizabeth was looking up at him, concern and uncertainty in her eyes and Georgiana looked terrified; he decided this must not stand. There was a great deal to be said and done with his cousin and Mr Collins but first he would like to marry.

"Never mind Lady Catherine," he said, feigning cheer. "Show her to a bedchamber and urge her to refresh herself, perhaps even nap."

"Nap?" Georgiana gave him a sceptical look. "She is livid, Brother. She would not nap for anything, nor do I think she will be persuaded to leave the drawing room."

Darcy thought again. "Then show the vicar to me here," he decided. "Summon Mr Bennet, Richard, and Miss Bennet."

Belatedly he recalled, "Oh and Mrs Bennet too."

"No, leave my mother to entertain your aunt," Elizabeth said, an impish gleam in her eye. "As one overbearing mother to another, they will no doubt have much to say to one another."

Darcy laughed and said to his sister, "Very well then, Georgie, you have your orders. March now."

When she had gone, he turned back to his bride. "Will you consent to marry me outside? It is nothing to the gardens at Pemberley, but there is a pretty little spot I think will do nicely."

"Any place I marry you is a wonderful spot," she told him.

Georgiana reappeared then, Mr Bennet (who managed to look both amused and bemused at the same time), Miss Bennet, Fitzwilliam, and the vicar with her.

Darcy told them happily, "I believe the location of our wedding has changed but the rest remains the same. Pray follow us."

He took Elizabeth on his arm, leaving the rest to trail behind them. About halfway there, Mr Bennet gently cleared his throat. Darcy stopped and looked at the gentleman who said, "Mr Darcy, I do not think I have as yet given her to you."

"Right."

He moved to release her, only to be vastly comforted by her

whisper, "Perhaps he has not given me but I have given myself to you. The ceremony is but a formality is it not?"

They shared a small, private smile and then he handed her to her father and moved to the place the vicar showed him.

It astonished him, even as he lived it that something so out of the common way should prove so perfect, but it was. The spot was perfectly lovely and he thought it particularly apropos that he should marry her outdoors.

For such an important moment, it was done rather quickly. Miss Elizabeth Bennet became Mrs Darcy in what seemed like a trice. Their well-wishers, though few, were exceedingly happy for them and expressive about their felicity.

When it was over, Darcy asked them to leave them for a moment. "I wish for a moment alone with my wife," he said, enjoying the word on his lips. Elizabeth seemed to enjoy hearing it too, glancing up at him with a sweet smile and a faint blush when she heard it.

He took her over to a bench which overlooked the courtyard where they had married, sitting with her and pulling her close. For a moment, they were silent, his senses being filled with the sight of the wedding ring he had placed on her finger, and the warmth of her body next to his.

"I can scarcely credit this," he said at last. "I keep expecting to wake and find it all a dream."

"Shall we pinch each other?" she teased him. "Just to be certain that it has all happened as we believe it did, of course."

"No," he said, daring to kiss her cheek. "I do not want to pinch you."

"Are you ticklish? No one ever tickles anyone in a dream so if we were to tickle one another, I believe it would be irrefutable proof."

He laughed at her. "You are a silly creature. I— Hey!" He found himself squirming as she, against all odds, found a spot beneath his waistcoat where he was indeed very ticklish. Just as soon as she found it, however, he found one which worked just as well on her, and then she ran.

She was surprisingly fast but he had much longer legs and caught her in a moment. She laughed as he picked her up and held her tight, whispering into her ear, "Now you have done it, Mrs Darcy. This will not go unanswered, I assure you."



She turned in his arms just in time to meet his lips with her own. As he kissed her, she murmured, "If this is but a dream, I pray I shall never wake."

They stayed in the courtyard for what was likely far too long, kissing and playing and wishing the rest of the world would just go away. However, duty had to call them in the form of Darcy's housekeeper, looking thoroughly discomfited as she told them their visitors awaited them.

# Happiness in Marriage

Everyone was in one room awaiting them—Bennets, de Bourghs, the Matlock family, and Mr Collins. No one was easy save for Mrs Bennet, who had the air of a duchess, sitting in Mr Darcy's favourite chair and commanding her audience with aplomb. No one else in the room had contributed to the discussion, leaving her to go on about all those subjects dear to her mind: lace, wealthy gentlemen, sleeve length, and her personal belief that the earlier a girl was taken from the school room to the ball room, the better. "It is why you see so many spinsters these days," she was saying as they entered. "Too much time with the nose in a book and before you know it, the bloom has left the rose."

Lady Catherine had not yet deigned to respond when Darcy entered with Elizabeth on his arm. With as much bonhomie as he could muster, he said, "Aunt, this is an unlooked-for pleasure."

Lady Catherine rose, glaring at them both suspiciously. Before she could speak, Darcy added, "Congratulate me, Madam; me, as well as my lovely bride, for we are just married this very morning.

"Mrs Darcy," he said, giving Elizabeth a significant look, "You remember Lady Catherine, of course.

On hearing Elizabeth called Mrs Darcy, Lady Catherine gasped loudly. Then she opened her mouth, her countenance leaving no doubt that what ensued would be vitriolic. However, her recent bout of poor health—and the fact that her constitution was unused to such insults against it—caused her instead to swoon.

Mrs Bennet reacted first, vigorously and decisively, her years of suffering from nervous complaints serving her well in this instance. She caught Lady Catherine by the arm, easing her on to a fainting couch with the assistance of Mrs Jenkinson, who was quick to assist. Quick as a wink, Mrs Bennet pulled her salts from her reticule and shoved them under Lady Catherine's nose.

Lady Catherine sputtered and choked, shoving the salts away firmly. "See here Darcy—"

Mrs Bennet returned Lady Catherine's shove of the phial, brooking no opposition in the thorough and close application of her salts. "Quiet my dear," she said. "Your felicity overcomes you."

Lady Catherine struggled to be freed from Mrs Bennet's exertions, clearly wishing to protest, only to be beaten down by another ghastly whiff of the salts.

"Madam, you must be still!" Mrs Bennet counselled.

Darcy snuck a quick look at his Matlock relations; Lord Matlock watched the goings-on with amusement while Lady Matlock look concerned but disinclined to assist. Fitzwilliam made no attempt to disguise his frank delight.

"Yes, Lady Catherine, you must remain as you are," said he. "And while you do, I believe I am due an explanation from my cousin."

All eyes turned to Anne, who looked surprised—albeit in a rather sedate manner—to hear herself addressed.

He gave Anne a pointed stare. She met his gaze with eyes not wholly focused, her cloudy, pale blue orbs uncomprehending and guileless. It became something of a standoff, a child's staring contest to see who would blink first. And in the end, the one who did surprised them both: Mr Collins, unable to bear the suspense, spoke out, wringing his doughy hands as he did it.

"I...I think you must surely forgive me for mercy cannot be a neglected quality in any man of noble character particularly one on whom shall depend so many and yet in regards to this one—"

This roused Anne to some action. "Mr Collins," said she, sounding just as her mother did, "You shall stop speaking at once."

Mr Collins gulped but continued drawing nearer to Darcy. "Surely I could never anticipate that a gentleman of such sense and education, who has the advantage of superior heritage—"

"Mr Collins, please speak plainly, sir. What do you know of this affair?"

Lady Catherine rose feebly from her couch, casting a nervous glance at Mrs Bennet and her rank vial. "What is he saying? He is a stupid parson, nothing more, and I shall not countenance him being afforded undue respect. The respect for rank—"

"Rank means nothing to me at this moment," Darcy interrupted sharply. "Now, Mr Collins shall speak and all else be silent."

"She pushed you off the steps," Mr Collins said quickly. "The back steps, the stone ones. You fell, striking your head, and Dunwoody said it was a concussion."

Darcy's hand went, almost involuntarily, to the back of his head where the lump had mostly receded but was still in evidence. This was not as he had expected, and he turned back to Anne in disbelief. "You pushed me?"

"Dunwoody was there to see her," Collins continued, with much nervous lip-licking and what seemed to be the development of an eye tic. "He said it was a concussion...because your eyes were... They were asymmetric...the pupils...Said you should see his colleague Simmons who was the best at these sorts of head injuries."

"Very well," said Darcy. "So it was a deceit constructed to cover the truth which is that my cousin attempted to kill me—"

"I did not attempt to kill you," replied Anne with what was, for her, excessive warmth.

"Now see here," said Lady Catherine. "Anne is of far too fine breeding and her heritage alone shows the strength and nobility of her character. I shall not have such vile accusations—"

Lady Matlock spoke, interrupting her sister. "Mrs Bennet, your salts if you would. Lady Catherine is becoming overwrought."

Lady Catherine drew back but not fast enough for Mrs Bennet, who rather aggressively placed the phial under the good lady's

nose, causing much gagging and near-retching.

“Mr Collins,” said Darcy. “I insist on knowing your part of this.” Taking a bit of a gamble, he said, “So it was you who hired a man to impersonate Simmons and deliver to me a death sentence.”

Mr Collins became even more pallid than usual. “I... I did not... that is to say...”

In near desperation, he looked to Lady Catherine. “I did it for her.” He raised a shaking, pointing arm. “She said very often that Miss de Bourgh was formed for her cousin and that he... that they...”

Suddenly Anne snapped. “Oh do shut up Mr. Collins. Shut up, and I shall tell it.”

Almost desperately, Mr Collins added quickly, “I had understood it to me that she objected to the fact that you jilted her. And for one of such low birth! Who could not react with violence to such a slight?”

No one in the room paid any heed to what he said for all of them had their eyes on Anne.

Anne screwed up her mouth in an unattractive manner. “You are such a bore, Darcy. I declare, I never saw anyone like you. Then, when for once you might do one thing of interest in your life, you immediately lose your backbone for it!”

“What are you saying?”

Anne’s face twisted, grief and anger both shaping her countenance. “You tipped your hand, sir. I was never truly free, was I? Dear cousin Anne, always there for the taking, yes?”

Darcy was incredulous. “I have not the least notion of what you are about.”

“You came from the park,” she said. “I was outside, enjoying a bit of my pipe—you know Mama will not permit me to have it in the drawing room. In any case, what you were doing, I cannot imagine but you were deeply saddened. I invited you to sit with me and to speak of it.”

Darcy felt a flush. “I did not... did I tell you...”

“You told me everything, everything you said, everything she said... you exposed to me the utter hopelessness you were feeling. I comprehended you perfectly. I too have gazed into the abyss and been left to despair. In fact, I told you then what I have so recently learnt of dear Robert’s father.”

“Who is Robert?” asked Mrs Bennet eagerly. “Is he single?”

Everyone ignored her, so she resumed her business of tending to Lady Catherine. "Remind me," said Darcy.

"His wife has recently borne him another son," said Anne bitterly. "Ghastly woman had the nerve to live through her travails."

Anne shook her head angrily, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. "Then you went too far. You could not be content to end your life; you needed to end mine with you. You threatened to go to my mother. I said, no allow me. You could not remain still; you attempted to follow me and I...I—"

"You pushed him," said Mr Collins. "Mr Darcy fell, and we thought you surely dead, but you were not and then we presumed we must persuade you that you were nigh unto death."

He turned to Lady Catherine beseechingly. "I believed I was participating in a deception which would lead to Mr Darcy's proposal... not dissuade him from it. To act in a manner best suited to his duty, and to protect Miss de Bourgh from the stain on her reputation which would come from being called a murderess."

"If I am not to marry my love, then I shall remain unmarried," Anne declared firmly. "Let this be known to any others who might wonder—a single lady, in possession of her own good fortune, is not in want of a husband, particularly one who says this."

Anne made her voice deep. "Anne, you do not love me nor I you, but it will make our family happy, so we might well marry."

Lord Matlock and Colonel Fitzwilliam both guffawed at such an offer, and even Lady Matlock winced then tittered behind her fan. Elizabeth, still close by Darcy's side, smiled up at him and said, gently, "Making proposals is not your strength, Mr Darcy."

"How fortunate for me that I shall not make any other," he told her.

"You know, my mortality is not often far from my mind," Anne continued. "A life lived in the shadow of death is quite different from a life lived by a person from someone who veritably believes he commands the sun. You, Darcy, are the latter, and I am the former—I thought it might be amusing to change places for a time. You, sir, needed to know the feeling of helplessness, of being directed by your frailties instead of your strength."

"You fell and Dunwoody said your brain had been injured, possibly rather severely. It was easy, from there, to persuade you that you were soon to die and see what happened." Anne shrugged.

"It was a little farce, a joke, nothing more."

"A joke?" Darcy exclaimed. "You poisoned me!"

"I surely did not," Anne replied.

"Yes, you did."

"You had nothing that I have not myself had for years now," Anne retorted. "I have never believed mercury was poisonous for if it were, I would be dead many times over. In any case, look at you—you are as hale and whole as ever, and standing beside you is the lady I know you love. What more do you want?"

With a little sniff, she added, "You should be thanking me, not censuring me."

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\* \* \*

"This is likely the oddest breakfast we shall ever attend," Elizabeth whispered to her husband approximately one hour later.

"By far," he agreed.

Though the food was plentiful and good, and the society comprised of all who were best known and mostly dear to them, it could not be said that their wedding breakfast was in any way pleasurable to them. Anne's confessions had overturned the whole of it; in one corner Lord Matlock argued vehemently with his sister, saying Anne needed to be taken to Bedlam and afforded the care appropriate to a madwoman. Lady Catherine argued just as vehemently that Lord Matlock needed to be taken to Bedlam for failing to place the blame where it truly laid: squarely on the head of Miss Elizabeth Bennet. By Lady Catherine's estimation, Anne had become overwrought that Miss Elizabeth was stealing her husband, and her distress over this had led to these actions.

Mrs Bennet did her best to forward Miss Bennet to Lady Matlock, for the purpose of marriage to one of her ladyship's sons. Lady Matlock divided her time between refusing her and attempting to calm her husband. Mr Bennet had found a book he wished to read in Darcy's library and had decamped there for the duration.

Mr Collins was half-proud of his role in the affair and half-

fearful of his benefactor's form of retribution. He spent a great deal of the time ingratiating himself to the Darcys, even going so far as to assure Darcy that, had he been truly dying, he would have given him the good counsel of a spiritual advisor. Darcy silenced him in pointing out that he would have done better had he given Anne some counsel in what was best done in the case of an injury—in other words to avoid poisoning the person afflicted.

Anne had been, in turns, defiant, tearful, angry, and blithe. She would not see that she had done wrong; in her estimation nothing had been done which had not already been done to her, many times over. Mercury? 'Twas a mere nothing. She had taken it for years, and it had done her little harm that she could discern. The most wrong she would admit to was in the deceit which she admitted could have been 'imprudent.'

The arguments raged; the blame shifted, and the facts began to mutate in the way that family legends often do. Darcy was, at first, a bit affronted that no one seemed of a mind to offer any sort of reparation to him or even any true apology. *Only look at what it has cost me...*

Except, it had not truly cost him anything had it? Indeed, it had gained him a great deal. As he thought of it, he looked to where Elizabeth sat with his aunt, Lady Matlock. She was his. Elizabeth Bennet had become Elizabeth Darcy just this very day.

Had it not been this way, he knew he would not be so fortunate. He might wish to think he would have pursued her; however, if he were true to his own self, he would have to admit it was more likely he would, as yet, be hiding away in his study drinking too much. Perhaps he might have determined to marry another. He might have even gone so far as to toss himself into the season with alacrity, finding himself wed to a proper society miss with all the right connexions and none of the right qualities.

Regardless of the indifferent sort of malice with which she had undertaken it, Anne had done him a good turn, and he believed he had come out of it so much the better.

It was these thoughts which moved him to beckon his new wife to his side. "How long is one required to remain at these things?" he whispered.

"You have hit on the fatal flaw in having it in your home rather than my father's," she whispered back.

"What is that?"



“We cannot merely escape. These are our guests, after all.”

“Ah yes, that is unfortunate. It would be very rude to leave them.”

“Not mannerly at all,” she agreed. “Although...”

He raised one brow in her direction.

“I have heard it said that my manners are not those of the fashionable world.”

“No! Who would say such a thing?” he teased her.

“Never mind that,” she said. “In any case, my country manners might just permit us to steal away.”

“Steal away?” He inhaled, breathing in the faint floral scent of her perfume. “I like that idea. Perhaps my manners are not of the fashionable world either. I could be induced to behave like a savage.”

She giggled, quickly clapping her hand over her lips lest they draw the notice of the others in the room. Fortunately, the rest continued bickering.

“You go first,” he told her. “Meet me in our chambers.” He moved to stand.

“Wait,” she hissed. “This is the first time I have been here. I have not the least idea where it is.”

“Go up the stairs and enter the third door on the right,” he whispered.

Then, after a quick look around the room, he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and said, “Quickly now. There has been enough of this nonsense; our felicity starts now.”

The author and publisher hope you have enjoyed this novella and remind you that the favor of your [REVIEW](#) is always appreciated!

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# About the Author

Amy D'Orazio is a long time devotee of Jane Austen and fiction related to her characters. She began writing her own little stories to amuse herself during hours spent at sports practices and the like and soon discovered a passion for it. By far, however, the thing she loves most is the connections she has made with readers and other writers of Austenesque fiction.

Amy currently lives in Pittsburgh with her husband and daughters, as well as three Jack Russell terriers who often make appearances (in a human form) in her book.

For more information about new releases, sales and promotions on books by Amy and other great authors, please visit [www.QuillsAndQuartos.com](http://www.QuillsAndQuartos.com).



# A Wilful Misunderstanding

## Coming in October

*The moment he saw her at the assembly in Meryton, he knew he loved her.*

When Fitzwilliam Darcy meets Elizabeth Bennet in the fateful autumn of 1811, their mutual infatuation is immediate and undeniable. They marry quickly and spend a blissful winter at Pemberley, falling more deeply in love with each other than either might have imagined possible.

But spring in London proves more challenging to them. Accident and artifice join to devastating effect for the young couple, destroying their felicity and creating an outcome neither might have imagined.

Two years later, happenstance unites them again. Sorrow and anger have built walls between them but can the love they once shared conquer the sins of the past? Is the love they still hold within them strong enough to prevail over the anger and mistrust that tore them apart?

# Also by Amy DOrazio

## A Lady's Reputation

“Mr. Darcy, I am eager to hear your explanation for the fact that quite a few people believe we are engaged.”

It starts with a bit of well-meant advice. Colonel Fitzwilliam suggests to his cousin Darcy that, before he proposes to Elizabeth Bennet in Kent, perhaps he ought to discuss his plans with their families first.

What neither man could have predicted however was that Lord Matlock would write the news to his sister, or that Viscount Saye would overhear and tell his friends, or that his friends might slip a little and let their friends know as well. The news spreads just as quickly through Hertfordshire once Mrs Bennet opens the express Mr Bennet receives from Mr Darcy, and in a matter of days, it seems like everyone knows that Mr Darcy has proposed marriage to Elizabeth Bennet.

Everyone, that is, except Elizabeth herself.

Her refusal is quick and definite—until matters of reputation, hers as well as Jane's, are considered. Then Mr Darcy makes another offer: summer at Pemberley so that Jane can be reunited with Mr Bingley and so that he can prove to Elizabeth he is not what she thinks of him. Falling in love with him is naturally impossible...but once she knows the man he truly is, will she be able to help herself?

## A Short Period of Exquisite Felicity

Is not the very meaning of love that it surpasses every objection against it?

Jilted. Never did Mr. Darcy imagine it could happen to him.

But it has, and by Elizabeth Bennet, the woman who first hated and rejected him but then came to love him—he believed—and agree to be his wife. Alas, it is a short-lived, ill-fated romance that ends nearly as soon as it has begun. No reason is given.

More than a year since he last saw her—a year of anger, confusion, and despair—he receives an invitation from the Bingleys to a house party at Netherfield. Darcy is first tempted to refuse, but with the understanding that Elizabeth will not attend, he decides to accept.

When a letter arrives, confirming Elizabeth's intention to join them, Darcy

resolves to meet her with indifference. He is determined that he will not demand answers to the questions that plague him. Elizabeth is also resolved to remain silent and hold fast to the secret behind her refusal. Once they are together, however, it proves difficult to deny the intense passion that still exists. Fury, grief, and profound love prove to be a combustible mixture. But will the secrets between them be their undoing?

### The Best Part of Love

Avoiding the truth does not change the truth.

When Fitzwilliam Darcy meets Miss Elizabeth Bennet, his heart is almost immediately engaged. Seeing the pretty lady before him, a lady of no consequence or fortune, he believes he should not form an attachment to her, unsuitable as such a woman is to be his wife.

What he cannot see, however, is the truth, that the simple country girl harbours a secret. Before she meets Darcy, Elizabeth has spent two years hiding from the men who killed her beloved first husband. Feeling herself destroyed by love, Elizabeth is certain she will never love again, certainly not the arrogant man who has offended her from the first moment of their acquaintance.

In time, Elizabeth surprises herself by finding in Darcy a friend; even greater is her surprise to find herself gradually coming to love him and even accepting an offer of marriage from him. As the newly married couple is beginning to settle into their happily-ever-after, a condemned man on his way to the gallows divulges a shattering truth, a secret that contradicts everything Elizabeth thought she knew about the tragic circumstances of her first marriage. Against the advice of everyone who loves her—including Darcy—Elizabeth begins to seek the truth, knowing she must have it even if it may destroy her newfound happiness with Darcy.